

OUR LADY OF LIES



"I HAVE FOUND OUT EVERYTHING."

[See page

OUR
Lady of Lies

By

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CONTENTS

CHAP.	PAGE
I. A PROVINCIAL CORNER IN PARIS	9
II. SIMPLE SOULS	23
III. A LOVER AND A SNOB	37
IV. SIGISBÉE	51
• V. THE DAWN OF LOVE	71
• VI. AN OBSERVER'S LOGIC	89
VII. THE PROFILE OF A MADONNA	97
VIII. THE MADONNA'S OTHER PROFILE	112
IX. A COMEDIENNE IN GOOD FAITH	129
X. IN THE SNARE	147
XI. DECLARATIONS	163
XII. CRUEL LOYALTY	180
XIII. AT HOME	185
XIV. DAYS OF HAPPINESS	201
XV. COLETTE'S HATRED	222
XVI. THE STORY OF A SUSPICION	236
XVII. EVIDENCE	262
• XVIII. THE HAPPIEST OF THE FOUR	287
XIX. ALL OR NOTHING	308

OUR LADY OF LIES

CHAPTER V

A PROVINCIAL CORNER IN PARIS

"SIR," the cabman said as he leant down from his box, "the gate is closed."

"At half-past nine!" a voice from the interior of the vehicle replied. "What a place! It is not much trouble to get out; the pavement is dry; I will walk." The door opened to allow the exit of a young man, who turned up the fur collar of his coat and crossed the pavement in his thin shoes. His patent shoes, flowered-silk socks, black trousers and opera hat showed that underneath his fur-lined overcoat he was in complete evening dress. The cab was one of these unnumbered vehicles which stand about near the clubs, and while looking after his horse the cabman, who was quite unaccustomed to this provincial corner of Paris, stared about him, just as his fare did, at the entrance of this extraordinary street, which was all the same situated close to the Faubourg Saint Germain. But at this period—about the beginning of February 1879—this street, the Rue Cœtlogon, connecting the Rue d'Assas with the Rue de Rennes, had the double peculiarity of being protected by a gate, and at night

illuminated by a lantern, which hung from a rope across the street in the old-fashioned style. To-day the appearance of the locality has greatly changed. The mysterious house on the right, built all-awry in the middle of its garden, and without a doubt once some dowager's peaceful home, has disappeared. The waste land which made the Rue Cœtlogon unapproachable to carriages from the direction of the Rue de Rennes, in the same way that the gate isolated it on the side of the Rue d'Assas, has been cleared of its heaps of stones. Gas jets have replaced the lantern. Two slightly uneven stones are the only remaining indication of the spot where the gate, which was closed though not locked every evening, stood. The young man, in consequence, did not need to ring for the gate to be opened, but before proceeding along the narrow street he stopped for a few moments to gaze at this melancholy blind-alley, with its garden on the right, the remains of houses, almost all of which had then disappeared, on the left, at the back confused masses of building in course of erection and the old lantern in the centre. Above it all a winter's chill moon shone in a sky tragic in its vastness and studded with rapidly-moving clouds. These were constantly passing over the bright moon, every time lightly veiling its metallic gleams, only to make them appear all the more brilliant when the moving mists had passed away into black space.

"What a scene for a farewell," the young man murmured in an undertone.

Had there been at hand an observant passer-by he would perhaps have recognised in this young fellow

a man of letters of the period in a class by himself. But the past is so quickly forgotten in the whirlwind of new works, incessant advertisement and sudden fame, which unceasingly sweeps the Boulevards, that the successes of ten years ago appear as far off and vague as those of another century. Two dramas of modern life, somewhat too discreetly inspired by Alexandre Dumas fils, had obtained for this young fellow a temporary vogue—he was over thirty-five but did not look thirty. He had not yet worn out the sonorous and high-sounding signature of Claude Larcher which he placed at the end of sketchy articles and stories. He was at that time the author of *La Gaule* and *Entre Adultères*, two uneven plays tinged with often-conventional pessimism, yet powerful from the acuteness of their analysis, the bitterness of the dialogue and their idealism. In 1879 these plays were three years old, and Claude, who had drifted into a life of dissipation, began to accept easy and well-paid commissions, for he was incapable of making another long and sustained effort for fame. Like many analytical writers he was in the habit of continuously studying and sitting in judgment upon himself, though this had no influence over his actions. The most insignificant details served as a pretext for an analysis of himself and his destiny, but the sole result of this continual state of mind was to maintain him at all times in a condition of useless and grievous lucidity. For that reason the sight of this peaceful street brought back to his mind the resolutions to lead a quiet life and work seriously which he had been vainly making for many months. He reflected

that he had promised a story to a magazine, a play to a theatre and paragraphs to a newspaper, while instead of sitting at his desk in the Rue de Varenne he was traversing Paris at ten o'clock in the evening in the costume of an idler and a snob. He would spend the rest of the evening and part of the night at a grand *fête* given by Countess Komof, a great Russian lady living in Paris, whose receptions at her enormous house in the Rue du Bel Respiro were as dull as they were mixed. He had come to call for another writer to take him to the reception, a man ten years younger than himself, who up to that time had led, in one of the houses in the discreet and taciturn Rue Cœtlogon, the noble life of assiduous work, the nostalgia of which was torturing him at the very moment. At twenty-five René Vincy—for that was his young colleague's name—had suddenly emerged into the bright sunlight of publicity, thanks to one of those pieces of literary good fortune which only happen twice in a generation. A one-act comedy in verse, *Sigisbée*, a fanciful and dreamy piece of work, written without any idea of practical success, had made him famous. It had been, like François Coppée's *Passam*, one of blasé Paris's sudden infatuations; there had been a spontaneous burst of applause at the Théâtre Français, and the next morning the newspapers had been loud in their praises of it. Claude could lay claim to a part of this astounding success. Was he not the first to have the MSS. of *Sigisbée*? Had he not taken it to his mistress, Colette Rigaud, the famous actress of the Rue de Richelieu? Colette, infatuated by a part in the play, had overcome all obstacles. He, Claude Larcher, when consulted

by Madam Komof as to the choice of a comedy to be performed in her drawing-room, had advised *Sigisbée*. The Countess had accepted his suggestion. It was to be played that very evening, and Claude, who was entrusted with the task of acting as chaperon to the author, had called for him at the flat in the Rue Cœtlogon, where René lived with a married sister. This extreme complaisance shown by a matured author for a beginner was not unmingled with vanity and irony. Claude Larcher, who spent his time in slander-ing the rich and cosmopolitan set of which Countess Komof was a member, and yet frequented it most assiduously, felt a tiny glow of pride in displaying to his colleague the details of his relations with Society. At the same time the poet's naïve stupor, the sort of childish amazement into which the magic but empty word "Society" threw him, diverted the malicious scoffer. He had already enjoyed, as a quietly comic spectacle, the timidity displayed by Vincy on the first visit they had paid the Countess together one day that week after lunch; and the thought of the feverish state René would be in made him smile as he traversed the few steps necessary to reach the door of the house where his young friend lived.

"To think I was once as childish as he is," he mused, at the recollection that he, like René, had once been launched into Society; he went on dreaming. "It is a sensation hardly ever suspected by those born and bred in Society, and how absurd it is for us to visit people like them."

In the course of his philosophising Claude had stopped at another gate on the left, and as it was

closed rung the bell. The gate opened on to a path which led to a three-storied house, separated from the street by a little strip of garden. The porter's lodge was in the archway, where the path ended. Was the porter absent, or had he not rung loudly enough? Claude had to ring a second time. This gave him a chance to scan the house, a black and deserted-looking edifice, only one window of which, on the ground floor, displayed a light. In these rooms, the four windows of which looked out upon the garden, the Fresneaus lived. Mademoiselle Emilie Vincy, the poet's sister, had in fact married Maurice Fresneau, an unattached professor, whom Claude knew through having been his colleague during the early days of his life in Paris, a beginning of authorship at which the famous writer of *La Gaule* now had the weakness to blush. How much he would have preferred to have wasted his patrimony at the clubs and with the fair sex! He, however, still preserved his friendship with his old colleague, out of gratitude for the monetary services he had rendered him in the past. He was at first interested in René because of his old comrade in misfortune; then he had felt the influence of the young man's natural charm. How many times had he come, weary of his unreal existence spent in grievous idleness and bitter passions, to rest for an hour in the modest room René occupied, by the side of the one where he now saw the lighted window, which was the dining-room. In the short space of time separating the two rings, by the aid of the rapidity of imagination peculiar to visionary artists, this room was pictured in Claude's imagination, like a symbol of the life of

dreams his friend had up to that time led. The poet and his sister had themselves hung upon the walls some red stuff from which here and there stood out a few engravings, chosen with the dreamer's refined taste: examples of Albert Durer, Gustave Moreau's "Helen" and "Orpheus," and a few water-colours by Gaya. How Claude had loved this interior with its iron bedstead, tidy table, and book-case full of books, where the stained floor appeared like the frame of the carpet in the centre of the room. The evocation of this picture suddenly modified the author's ideas, and he ironically felt himself becoming sad at the thought that this entrance into Society by way of the Countess Komof's drawing-room was a great event for a child of twenty-five who had always lived there. How enchanted with the idea was the man he was about to introduce into the luxurious and artificial set recruited by the Countess!

"I am responsible," he said to himself as he was aroused from his reverie by the opening of the gate, "since I advised him to go and dressed him for this evening." He had, in fact, taken René to his tailor, hosier, bootmaker and hatter in the process of what he jokingly called his "investiture." "I ought to have thought before of the dangers connected with his entry into Society. What a sad gift it is to anticipate the worst! He will be introduced to four or five women, invited to dinner two or three times, omit to leave cards, and then forget and be forgotten."

He proceeded along the path and rang the bell at the first door on the right before the porter's lodge, that being the Fresneaus' entrance. This strange

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arrangement of the buildings was explained by the existence of a second little garden and second house also enclosed within the gate in the Rue Cœtlogon. The person who opened the door was a big heavy woman of thirty, short-waisted, with square shoulders and a face all in one piece, which a cap of Auvergne shape encircled and two brown eyes of animal simplicity illuminated. Her country features expressed instinctive distrust, as did the way in which the woman half opened the door instead of throwing it wide, and the blinking of her eyes as she lifted the oil lamp high up so as to throw the light full on the visitor. She recognised Claude and her broad face assumed a kindly look, which showed the favour with which the writer was regarded in the Fresneau household. The girl smiled, displaying her small white teeth, like animal's teeth.

"Good evening, Françoise," the young man said, "is your master ready?"

"It is M. Larcher," the servant joyfully answered; "he is ready," she added. "You will find the party in the dining-room. Wait till I help you off with your overcoat. Oh! sir, how heavy it must be on your back!"

The maid-of-all-work's familiarity—she had come straight from the village of Auvergne, which was the professor's native place, to the Fresneaus, and having been there for the last fifteen years looked upon it as her home—always amused Claude Larcher. He was one of these argumentative literary men who dote upon naturalness without a doubt, because it rests them from the wasting and interrupted labour of their

own brain. Françoise was the sort of person who talked to him of his own works in such quaint terms, or expressed with ingenuous naïvete the fear which haunted her, that some day the dramatic author would put her in a play; or else she applied to literary expressions she had picked up when waiting at table that strange power of deformation so common in the lower classes. This evening, dominated by the expression of sadness which the sudden thought of his part as Society tempter had induced, he refrained from his usual jokes with the servant. While Françoise hung up his overcoat he looked round the lobby he knew so well, from which the doors of the other rooms opened. The poet's room on the right faced the south; the Fresneaus were content with a smaller room which faced the north, by the side of which was that of their son Constant, a little boy of six, of whom Emilie was less fond than she was of her brother. The cause of the passionate affection between brother and sister Claude knew in detail just as he knew the family's whole history. This modest and simple though touching story only too well justified the remorse he felt at taking from this refuge one so dear.

The father of Emilie and René, a solicitor at Vouziers, had died a wretched death through drunkenness. After the business had been sold, all debts paid, and a few securities realised, the widow of this country *roué* found herself in possession of about fifty thousand francs. Vouziers being associated in her mind with many painful memories, she had come with her two very young children to reside in Paris. She had a brother there, Father Taconet, a very distinguished

priest, who was formerly a pupil at the Normal School, but had suddenly taken orders, without giving any explanation of his resolution to his astonished friends. Directly after leaving Saint Sulpice, to the, if possible, more intense surprise of his friends, he opened an educational establishment in the Rue Cassette. Being a pronounced Catholic of liberal ideas, Father Taconet realised that many wealthy middle-class families hesitated between the purely lay colleges and the religious colleges, without finding in either the exact requirements of their double need of traditional Christianity and modern development. He had only entered the Church the more easily to realise a project of harmony between these two opposing currents, and his whole ambition was satisfied the day he founded, in company with two younger priests, an ecclesiastical day school at which the pupils could obtain the same instruction as at the Saint Louis College. The success of this Saint André School—Father Taconet had called it after his own patron saint—was so rapid that in the third year three little single-horse omnibuses were required to take the pupils to their homes and fetch them. The possibility of giving her son, then ten years old, an exceptional education, was one of the reasons which decided Madam Vincy in selecting Paris as her place of residence, so much the more as the age of Emilie, sixteen, assured her mother valuable assistance in the care of a new home. Acting on the advice of Father Taconet, whom the care of the finances of his school had turned into a good man of business, she invested her fortune of fifty thousand francs in

Italian stocks, which at that time stood at sixty-five. The widow in this way had an income of 2800 francs a year. The secret of the idolatrous affection of Emilie for her young brother was the heap of daily sacrifices which this income represented. In the life of the heart people run after suffering as gamblers go after the money they have lost. Madam Vincy fell ill almost immediately after their removal to Paris, which took place in 1863, in that same house in the Rue Cœtlogon, but on the third floor. Till 1871, when the poor woman died, the young girl had to fill a triple post: to nurse her bed-ridden mother, to look after the tiniest details of a household where fifty sous represented a large sum, and to follow her brother's education hour by hour. She carried out this hard task to the very end, without the weariness of such an existence, though it somewhat paled the fresh colour of her thin cheeks, extracting not a single complaint from her lips. She was like those workers in the old Parisian songs who were consoled for the weariness of their hard and continuous toil as long as they had a flower in bloom upon their window-sill. In her case the flower had been her little brother, a charming child with beautiful mobile eyes, who had at once recompensed Emilie for her devotion by his success at college. At a very early age the brother had begun to write verses, and happily Emilie had been the confidant of his first efforts. So when Fresneau asked her to marry him, during the six months following their mother's death, she tacked on to her consent the condition that the professor should not leave Paris and that René should continue to live

with them, without adopting any other career than literature. Fresneau delightedly accepted these conditions. He was one of those good and simple folk who know how to love, that is to say, they agree without discussion to the slightest wish of the person they love. He had been captivated by Emilie's charm, without daring to tell her so, ever since he had known the family, through chance making him René's teacher at the Saint André School in 1860. This man, who was nearly forty, had been attracted to the young girl by a strange community of destiny. Had he not on his part renounced all egoistic hope, all personal aspiration, with the object of paying the debts of his father, who had gone bankrupt? From 1858 to 1872, the date of his marriage, the professor had paid off debts amounting to 20,000 francs, and his income had been derived from lessons which brought him five francs! If is added to the total of hours of work such a result represents the time necessary for the preparation of the lessons and the correction of the exercises, and the coming and going from one place to the other—it sometimes happened that Fresneau had, on the same morning, a class in the Rue Cassette, another in the Ternes, and a third near the Jardin des Plantes—we have the schedule of an existence the like of which there are many in private school tuition, and which ends up by wearing out the most powerful constitutions. His passion for Emilie had been the romance of his life, which up to that time had been too absorbed for reverie to even find a place in it. Father Taconet had performed the ceremony, and René had enlisted one more slave to his genius.

Claude Larcher was not ignorant of any of these facts, all of which had been of importance in the development of the young poet's talents and character. During the moment Françoise spent in hanging up his overcoat, when he cast a glance round the half-lit lobby, the most trifling details of this ordinary ante-room contained a moral significance for him. He knew why, in the umbrella-stand near the hall door, there stood by the side of a large alpaca umbrella with a heavy handle, used by the professor, a neat and elegant English umbrella selected by Madam Fresneau for her brother. He knew that the same hand, that of a doting sister, had made a present of that smart cane which, without a doubt, cost thirty times as much as the strong plain stick Fresneau used on fine days. He knew that the professor's books, after long running the risk of dust in the lobby upon black wooden shelves, had ended by being exiled even from there to a dark cupboard and the lobby given up to the decorative fancies of René, who had adorned the walls with engravings of his choice. These were a series of admirable lithographs by Raffet of the great Emperor, pictures which ought to have raised Fresneau, the republican, in revolt. But Claude also knew that Fresneau would be quite the last person in the world to be astonished at the constant sacrifice of the entire home to this brother, whom he made his God out of love for Emilie, just as the servant and even the uncle had done. For Father Taconet, too, had come under the ascendancy of the young man's nature and talents. He had told himself that his nephew possessed a small income, that at the moment

the small sum invested by his advice in Italian stocks brought in 3000 francs a year, and that he himself would leave a fortune of about the same size. Was not René's Christian education a guarantee that his talents as a writer would be placed at the service of the ideas of the Church? In this way the priest himself had done his share in embarking the poet upon the difficult pathway of literature, where, up to that time, the favoured youth had met with nothing but good fortune. All this happiness was composed of pure devotion, tender affection, family petting and warm and glowing confidence. Claude understood the cost of it better than anyone, for as an orphan he had to struggle alone at the age of twenty against the contamination, cruelty and disenchantment of the life of the poor artist in Paris. He never visited the Fresneaus without feeling a sort of pity which gripped his heart as it did on this occasion—a pity which made him laugh very loudly and display the most withered scepticism. He was in this way so enervated that the least emotion caused him pain.

CHAPTER II

SIMPLE SOULS

It was with a smiling, almost joking, expression that Claude entered the tiny dining-room, where was assembled the party, consisting of René first of all, the hero of what seemed to the rest of the household an extraordinary adventure, Madam Fresneau and her husband, and last of all Madam Offarel, the wife of a subordinate official at the Ministry of War, with her two daughters, Angelique and Rosalie. These six people were sitting round a walnut table upon chairs made of the same wood, upholstered in horse-hair and shining with age. This dining-room suite, purchased by the country solicitor when he went into housekeeping, had been preserved intact since the death of Vouziers. A movable stove, standing in the fireplace, made the atmosphere of the close room quite stifling, and bore witness to the economy of the mistress of the house. Emilie only allowed a wood fire in René's room. A porcelain lamp, suspended by brass chains, illuminated the circle of heads which turned in the direction of the visitor, and its furthest gleams rested upon a wall papered with yellow flowers, upon which a few old dishes gleamed. In the shaft of light the play of the different features appeared to the author as he entered very distinct.

Besides sympathies and antipathies are not generally concealed among the middle classes; the human animal in them is untamed, and also not accustomed to politeness' continual untruths. Emilie stretched out her hand to Claude—a very rare gesture with her—a smile upon her parted lips and a gleam of pleasure in her brown eyes; her whole being expressed her frank joy at seeing someone whom she felt loved her brother.

“Do not his clothes fit him well?” These were the first words she addressed to the visitor, before he had exchanged greetings with the rest of the company and taken his place in the circle. It was quite true, for René at that moment presented a very fine specimen of that creature so rare in Paris—a good-looking young man. At twenty-five the author of *Sigisbée* could still show the unwrinkled brow, rosy cheeks, innocent mouth and bright eyes which betokened an entire soul and an unattached temperament. He was very much like the little-known medallion which the sculptor David executed of Alfred de Musset in his youth. But his thick hair, luxuriant blonde beard and square shoulders, corrected, by their look of robustness and health, that look of frailty and effeminacy which is almost too pronounced in the poet's features. The eyes in particular, usually of a very dark blue, betokened at this moment a naïve, unalloyed happiness, and Emilie's exclamation was justified by a native grace which the dress suit and unaccustomed costume did not conceal. His loving sister's forethought had gone so far as to provide the little gold studs for the shirt front and cuffs, which

she had purchased out of her savings at a jeweller's in the Rue de la Paix, after mysteriously asking Claude's advice. She herself had tied her brother's tie, and had inspected his first dress suit with the same care she had bestowed upon his attire before his confirmation.

"Poor sister," he said with a jolly laugh, which displayed his white and regular teeth, "forgive her, Claude. I am her only flirtation."

"Ah, well! You are distracting us again, René," Fresneau said as he shook hands with Larcher. The professor was beginning to turn grey. He was big and heavy in appearance, with untidy hair and an unkempt beard. He had spread out in front of him sheets of paper, with wide margins covered with pencil notes, his next day's exercises. He gathered them up, adding: "You no longer have the drudgery of correcting exercises, lucky man! Have a glass of something to keep out the cold?" He picked up a decanter half full of brandy, which had been left after the coffee had been removed, for on ordinary occasions this room served as dining-room and drawing-room as well. The real drawing-room, which was also in the front of the house, was only occupied on state occasions.

"A cigarette?" Fresneau added, as he offered him a pouch of brown tobacco and cigarette papers.

Claude made a gesture of refusal as he bowed to the other three ladies, without either of them offering him their hand. They were working, the mother at a blue woollen stocking which she was knitting, leaving off now and then to scratch her head with one of the needles, while the two girls were embroidering upon a

green groundwork. The mother's hair was white, her face square and wrinkled; through the spectacles, which hardly lodged upon her short nose, her eyes threw a look of profound aversion at the newcomer. One of the daughters, Angelique, with her black eyes, at the same time sharp and fugitive, and with her blushes as ready as her smiles, belonged to the army of timid mockers. The other sister, Rosalie, had inclined her head without lifting her beautiful eyes, which were as black as her sister's, though with a gentle and timid expression in them. A few minutes later the lashes, which veiled her eyes, were lifted, she looked in René's direction, and her needle shook in her fingers as she followed her pattern. She bent her head still more and her auburn hair gleamed in the lamplight. Nothing of this had escaped Claude. He knew of old the habits and characters of the Offarel ladies—as Fresneau called them with provincial formality. They were sure to have come about seven, immediately after their own dinner at their flat in the Rue de Bagneux. They had no doubt been escorted thither by the head of the family, who had gone on to the Café Tabourey, at the corner of the Odeon, to conscientiously read the newspapers there. It had not been much trouble for Claude to guess that the old lady cherished the dream of a marriage between Rosalie and René; he suspected his young friend of encouraging this hope by an instinctive taste for the romantic, and he did not doubt that Rosalie was captivated, the more seriously of the two, by the poet's cleverness and good looks. He quite realised that the young girl loved and feared him, Claude Larcher, at the same

time. She loved him because he was devoted to René; she feared him because he was leading René into a fresh sphere of life. To the innocent child, as to all the other members of the family circle, the evening at Madame Komof's seemed like a distant expedition into a fantastic and unexplored land. Everyone based upon it chimerical hopes or foolish fears. Emilie Fresneau, who had always cherished boundless ambitions for her brother, pictured him leaning upon the mantelpiece reciting verses in the midst of a company of duchesses, the lover of a Russian princess. Rosalie was the victim of the most bitter of all anticipations, that of the woman who loves. René's eyes frightened her, though she reproached herself for it by the absolute joy they expressed at going into a society where she, who was half betrothed to him, could not go. They were more closely bound to one another than Claude thought, having exchanged secret vows one spring evening the previous year. René then was unknown to fame. She had him to herself. He found everything with her charming, without her insipid. To-day she foresaw, from the depths of an ignorance which her jealousy enlightened, the dangerous combinations with which she was threatened. With her home-made clothes which spoiled her pretty figure, with ready-made shoes in which her tiny feet were lost, her modest frills and ordinary sleeves, she felt herself become humble at the thought of the great ladies René was going to meet. That was the reason her needle trembled, her eyelids rose and fell more quickly, and her heart was oppressed with a vague fear, all the time the

professor was insisting upon Claude having a liqueur and a cigarette.

"It is excellent cider-brandy one of my pupils sent me from Normandy. Are you quite sure you won't have a drop? You would rather have it another time. It will bring back to your mind the days when we were teaching at the Venabostes. Four hours a day, including Thursdays and exercises. A hundred and fifty francs a month! How jolly we were in those days! We had a quarter of an hour's interval between the two classes, during which you used to take me to the Rue Saint-Jacques—I can see the little café now—to have a drop of brandy to sustain us. You called that to harden the arteries, under the pretext that a man is as old as his arteries and that alcohol diminishes their elasticity."

"I was at least twelve," Claude said, laughing at the recollection, "and was free from rheumatics."

"It cannot be very good for you," Madam Offarel interposed bitterly, "to go out nearly every evening, and big dinners, with their strong wines and highly-spiced dishes, are the things that burn up the blood."

"Go on," Emilie said jokingly, "we have had the pleasure of M. Larcher's company at our table, you do not know how sober he is. Besides, a person can go to bed rather late if he can sleep all the morning. René has told us that it is so quiet at your house," she added, directly addressing the author, "and so charming."

"Yes, it is very quiet. I have hunted out a little flat in an old house in the Rue de Varenne, of which I happen to be now the only resident. When the

blinds are drawn it seems like the middle of the night. I can only hear the bells of a convent, which is quite close, and the roar of Paris in the far distance."

"I have always heard tell that an hour's sleep before midnight is worth two afterwards," the old lady, whom Claude's politeness exasperated, interposed. She disliked him, without understanding the real reason, though it was less on account of his influence over René than from a profound natural antipathy. She felt she was being studied by this person with the searching eyes, elegant manners and, to her, unintelligible smile; she had a feeling of uneasiness, which she showed by her sharp attacks upon him. She added: "Besides, M. René will not have that rest here. At what time will this affair at the Countess's finish?"

"I do not know," Claude, whom the ill-concealed spite of his enemy amused, said. "*Sigisbée* will be performed about half-past ten, and supper will be served about half-past twelve or one o'clock."

"M. René will be in bed about two, I suppose," Madam Offarel went on with the visible satisfaction of an aggressive person who hurls an irrefutable argument at an opponent, "and as M. Fresneau goes out about seven, and Françoise is moving about from six o'clock—"

"Come, come, once is not a habit," Emilie said with a show of impatience, trying to divert the grumbler's conversation, which she anticipated would end in some insult, by flattering one of the old lady's pet hobbies. "You have not told us if Cinderella has definitely returned home."

Cinderella was a grey cat which had been given by Madam Offarel to a young man, one of their friends, M. Jacques Passart, a professor of drawing, whose friendship with the head of the family a common taste for water-colours had cemented. These were the two domestic vices: the husband's was painting, which went to the length of doing landscapes at his office; while the wife's took the form of a weakness for the feline species, five members of it being maintained at their flat in the Rue de Bagneux, which was situated, like the Fresneaus', upon the ground floor, and also made pleasant by a tiny garden. Jacques Passart, who cherished for Rosalie an unreciprocated affection, had so often given way to expressions of delight over the gentleness of Madam Offarel's pets, that she had given him Cinderella. After a residence of three months in the room Passart occupied on a fifth floor in the Rue du Cherche-Midi, poor Cinderella had kittens. Two out of three were drowned and she disappeared with the other. Passart had not dared to mention her flight. Two days later Madam Offarel heard a scratching at the garden door. "It is very strange," she said, as she counted the number of sleeping cats, one upon her bed, another upon the only couch and a third upon the mantelpiece. "There are three there, and yet one is scratching at the door." She opened the door and Cinderella came in, with her back arched, and began to rub her head against her old mistress, delighting her by a display of affection. This visit, made all the more mysterious by the confession Passart had to make of his negligence in looking after the precious cat, had been the previous

evening the subject of an interminable discussion between Madam Offarel and Emilie, so the fact of its not having been mentioned that evening showed the importance Rosalie's mother attached to René's entrance into Society, as she replied:

"Ah! Cinderella!" in a tone which was a mixture of her natural sourness and the enthusiasm the memory of the pretty animal inspired. "But does M. René remember her?" And on the young man making a sign that he had not forgotten this interesting creature: "Ah, well! she came back this morning with her kitten in her mouth and laid it at my feet. Yes, she watched me. The other day she came to see if I still wanted her, and the second time she was asking me to take her kitten too. Animals are more lovable than persons," she added in conclusive fashion, "and they are more faithful."

"What an admirable trait of instinct!" Fresneau cried as he resumed the making of strange signs upon his exercises. "I shall quote it to my classes." The poor fellow, who as a teacher was a sort of "Jack of all Trades," taught Philosophy at a preparatory school for degrees, Latin somewhere else, History somewhere else, and even English, which he could hardly speak. Through this *régime* he had contracted the habit, common to university men, of talking long-windedly upon every opportunity. The marvellous return of Cinderella to her old home served as a text for a never-ending dissertation. He went on telling story after story, apparently forgetting his exercises; for this excellent though weak man, who could never keep in order even a class of ten, had at his command

the most penetrative observation where his wife was concerned. While his pencil was marking the margins of his scholars' work he had distinctly perceived Madam Offarel's hostility and gathered from Emilie's tones that she was not confident of the outcome of a talk conducted in this fashion. So the professor prolonged his monologue to give the nerves of the acrimonious lady time to calm. He had not long to play his part. The bell rang again.

"It is papa! it is a quarter to ten!" Rosalie cried. She too had suffered because of her mother's bitterness to Claude and René. Her father's arrival, which was the signal for their departure, came like a deliverance to the girl, who usually felt heart-broken at leaving the Fresneaus. But she knew her mother, and she felt, by instinct rather than by reasoning, how paltry and displeasing the bitterness of her remarks must appear to René. He had only too many reasons already for not delighting in their society! She got up as her father came in. He was a long, lean man with a hollow face, of the type which invariably recalls the immortal Don Quixote, a nose like an eagle's beak, hollowed temples, and a slightly-drawn mouth; while, dominating the rest of his appearance, he had a receding chimerical forehead, the wrinkles and protuberances of which seemed to have been created by manias and false ideas. He also combined with his passion for water-colours the ridiculous weakness of always diverting the conversation to his own imaginary ailments.

"It is very cold to-night," was his first utterance, and at once turning to his wife: "Adelaide, have you

any tincture of iodine in the house? I am sure I shall have rheumatics in the morning."

"Is your carriage warmed?" Emilie asked Claude at this remark.

"Yes, madam," the writer replied; and looking at his watch: "We must be off if we do not wish to be late." While he was saying good-bye to the company, and Emilie was showing him out, René, without shaking hands with anybody, disappeared through the door which led from the dining-room into his own room. "He is, without a doubt, gone to get his overcoat, he will come back," Rosalie thought; "he cannot be going without saying good-bye to me, more particularly as he has not looked at me all the evening." She went on with her work while Fresneau repeated the invitation he had given his friend earlier in the evening:

"Have a drop to keep out the cold?"

"Just a drain," his guest replied.

"You are not," the professor went on, "like Larcher, for he despised my brandy."

"M. Larcher?" said the visitor. "Do you not know his usual drink? Ah! ah!" he went on in lower tones, prudently looking in the direction of the lobby, "I read an article in the paper this evening in which he was nicely trounced."

"Tell us about it, father," Madam Offarel said as she put her work down upon her knees for the first time that evening, letting appear upon her face the undisguised joy of her unfriendly sentiments just as she had a little while before displayed her naïve affection for her cat.

"It appears," the old man went on, accentuating his words, "that in the drawing-rooms M. Larcher frequents instead of cups of tea he drinks glasses of blood."

"Glasses of blood?" Fresneau inquired, astonished at this strange story; "for what reason?"

"To sustain him," Madam Offarel quickly interrupted. "Have you not noticed his face? What a life he must lead!"

"It also appears," the narrator went on, for with that base ardour of credulity, so common among the middle classes when it is a case of the countless envious calumnies to which the famous are a prey, he had still another anecdote or two to unfold. "It seems he lives surrounded by a court of female worshippers, and has found a sure way of turning into a success the most insignificant lines which come from his pen. He has a few dozen copies of the proofs pulled, and takes a copy to each lady he knows. They are left lying about, and then suggestions are made as to the alteration of this or that word or phrase. The alterations are made, and the ladies, to some extent, consider that they are part authors of what he has written."

"I am not surprised," Madam Offarel said; "he looks to me just like a conceited adventurer."

"Good gracious," Fresneau interposed, "I don't think much of his literary efforts, but to be an adventurer is quite another story! Nobody is more childish than he is, poor Madam Offarel. When I see in the papers that he knows women's hearts it amuses me very much. I have known him from the

time when he was in love with the worst hussies and thought they were angels, though they deceived and trifled with him. René was telling us the other day that he spends his time being made fun of by little Colette Rigaud, who is acting in *Sigisbée*, a wench who would grudge him his last sou."

"Tut!" Emilie, coming in just in time to hear the end of this little speech, said as she put her hand over her husband's mouth. "M. Claude is our friend and I will not have him slandered. My brother has asked me to wish you all good-night for him," she added. "The two gentlemen discovered that it was later than they believed, and they started post-haste. When shall I have my water-colour representing the last scene from *Sigisbée*?" she asked the new arrival.

"Ah! The time of year is bad for studies," he replied. "It gets dark so soon and we are overwhelmed with work; but you shall have it, you shall have it. What is the matter, Rosalie? You are very pale."

The poor girl was, in fact, suffering terribly at the thought that René had gone without a word or look for her. Her throat contracted, tears came into her eyes. She had the strength, however, to repress her sobs, and to reply that the heat of the stove was too much for her. Her mother exchanged a glance with Emilie, which conveyed such a direct reproach that in spite of herself Madam Fresneau dropped her eyes. She, too, was painfully impressed, for she loved Rosalie. But she had always been opposed to the marriage, as it was too far removed from the ambitious projects she vaguely cherished on her brother's

behalf. When the mother and two girls had got up, put on their hats and come to say good-night, the young woman found herself kissing Rosalie more affectionately than usual. She felt pity for her sufferings on René's behalf, but the pity was not without a feeling of pleasure, for the young girl's sufferings proved the man's indifference, and when the door had closed behind them it was with a look of unalloyed joy in her clear brown eyes that she said to Françoise:

"You must be very careful not to make a noise to-morrow morning."

"No more than a late husband," the servant replied.

"Nor you, you clumsy fellow," she said to her husband as she returned to the dining-room, where the professor was proceeding with his exercises. "I have told Constant to dress very quietly and go to school," she added with a smile of pride. "What a triumph it will be for René this evening if the fashionable folk are not too hard to please!" She repeated one of Claude's regular phrases. "Bah! they cannot; his verses are so fine, almost as fine as himself."

"Do you know, it is to be hoped that all the ladies will not spoil him as you do," Fresneau interposed; "or he will end by losing his head. No," he went on, to flatter his wife's feelings, "it is very charming to see how simple he remains, even in the time of his success."

Emilie kissed her husband tenderly for that last phrase.

CHAPTER III

A LOVER AND A SNOB

THE two authors jumped into the cab, which set off at a fast trot along the Rue du Cherche-Midi to the Boulevard Montparnasse, and thence traversed the long succession of avenues which lead almost straight to the Arc de Triomphe, crossing the Seine by the Pont de l'Alma. For the first part of the ride they were both silent. René was recognising every detail of this district, in which so many memories of his childhood were centred. A vague mist obscured the cab windows, the physical symbol of the kind of fog which floated between his real life and the past, still so close to him. There was not a corner in the Rue du Cherche-Midi with which he was not as familiar as the walls of his room, from the lofty dark pile, the military prison, to the wine-shop, the sign of which was a hind, and the quiet entrance to the Rue de Bagneux, where Rosalie lived. The recollection of the sweetheart he had left that evening without wishing good-bye caused him no suffering. He had the same sensation as the awakened dreamer, so little resemblance was there between the person who formerly tramped these streets in the days of his youth, poor and obscure, and the man sitting at that moment in the cab with Claude Larcher—famous, for all Paris had applauded his playlet; rich, for

Sigisbée, produced in September, had by February brought him in the enormous sum, for him, of twenty-five thousand francs. This source of income would not yet dry up. *Sigisbée* filled the bill with a three-act comedy by a famous author, "Le Jumeau," and would run for a long while. The sale of the book, too, would be very productive, and so would the provincial and foreign translation rights. That was only a commencement, and René had many other works in reserve: a volume of philosophical poems entitled *Les Cimes*; a drama in verse, upon the Renaissance, called *Savonarole*; and a story of passion, half planned, for which he wanted a title. The cab proceeded, and in the profound exaltation of assured success and boundless projects another nervous intoxication mingled: that of going into Society as he was doing. A young girl at her first ball is no more moved than was this great child. A sort of fever seized him, which almost abolished his personality. It is poets' good and ill fortune that this power of amplification, even to fantastic dimensions, exaggerates impressions, in themselves ordinary to meanness. That is the origin of those swift passages, almost thunderous, from excessive hope to deepest disgust, and from infatuation to despair, which give to their imagination, in consequence of their character and sensitiveness, a sort of continuous oscillation, an absolute uncertainty, terrible for the men and worse for the women who become attached to these elusive souls. It is, however, among these souls that this dangerous mobility does not destroy love. That was René's case. The involuntary comparison between his present and his

past, suddenly evoked in him by the familiar aspect of the streets, led his thoughts towards his older friend, who had been the cause of this turn-about of destiny. He made one of these naïve movements, which comprise the unique charm of youthful natures, because in them is that beautiful and rare thing in civilized life, spontaneousness, the invincible bond between the internal and external being. He took the hand of his companion, who, like himself, was silent, and pressed it as he said:

"How good you have been to me! Yes," he insisted, seeing a look of astonishment in Claude's eyes, "if you had not been so indulgent with my first attempts I should never have taken *Sigisbée* to you; and if you had not taken it to Mademoiselle Rigaud it would even now be lying in the MSS. box at some theatre. If you had not spoken of me to the Countess Komof my play would not have been acted there and I should not be going there to-night. I am fortunate, very fortunate! Ah, my friend, you will not find me foolish like a schoolboy; if you only knew how, in my youth, I dreamed of the Society into which you are now introducing me, where the women's toilettes alone are poetry, where everything makes an exquisite frame for joy and sorrow!"

"If those women's souls were only of the same material as their dresses!" Claude interrupted satirically. "But I admire you," he went on; "do you, by any chance, think that you are likely to be a social lion because you are invited to Madam Komof's, a foreigner, whose house is a passage, or at one of the five or six strange women's houses you will meet

jealous of that fellow?' First of all he samples the gin. Briefly, I was with her this morning. I knew all that and did not believe it. If you were to see Salvaney you would understand it is quite incredible, when you think of her beautiful tender eyes, charming beauty and Botticelli mouth. Ah! what a pity! Yes, I was visiting her. A letter came. The servant, a new one, and clumsy, said very stupidly: 'It is from M. Salvaney; there is an answer.' She had just sworn to me, between two kisses, that nothing had passed between them, not even the shadow of a flirtation. She held the letter in her hand. I said to myself—yes, I had the simplicity to say to myself—'She will give me the letter and I shall find in it a written proof that she has not lied to me, a certain proof, since Salvaney could not know that I should see this letter.' She held the letter and looked at me. 'Very well,' she said, 'I will answer it. Will you excuse me?' she added, as she went into the other room with her letter. Without doubt you think that I picked up my hat and stick and went out, never to return, saying to myself, 'What a coquette!' I stayed, dear friend, and she came back, rang the bell, handed the reply to the servant, and then came towards me. 'Are you angry?' she asked. Silence. 'Did you want to read that letter?' Silence again. 'No,' she went on, with a frown, 'you shall not read it. I have burnt it. There was nothing in it but a request for the pattern of the material for a fancy ball-dress, but I want you to believe my word.' And the way she said it, and acted! She has never shown greater talent. Don't ask me what reply I made to her. I

treated her as the worst of women. All the hate, disgust and contempt I have in my heart for her I cast in her face, and then as she wept I took her in my arms and kissed her, after she had lied to me and I had insulted her. Have I not sunk low indeed?"

"But were your suspicions just?" René asked.

"Were they just!" Claude replied, in that tone of cruel triumph which jealous people assume when their frightful frenzy to find out the truth has led them to the discovery that their worst suspicions are well founded. "Do you know what Salvaney's note contained? An appointment. And Colette's? The acceptance of the invitation. I know it, I have had her followed—yes, I committed that piece of villainy. After rehearsal she met him and they dined together."

"Why do you not break with her?" Vincy said.

"I have done so," Claude replied, "for good. I give you my word of honour. Only, I want to tell her what I think of her once more. Ah, the coquette! But you shall see how I treat her this evening."

Claude's lament betokened such suffering that René's gaiety was suddenly damped. The feeling of pity for the man, to whom he was deeply attached by the tie of gratitude so pleasant to a young heart, was mingled with the impression of disgust which Colette's shameless duplicity caused him. At that moment an obscure feeling of remorse came to him too, by contrast, at the recollection of the pure face and faithful soul of Rosalie. But it was only a tremor, quickly dissipated by the sight of the change of expression his friend displayed. This curious man, who lived entirely upon his nerves, possessed the power of changing ideas and

sentiments with disconcerting rapidity. He had just spoken, with feeling in the voice, with despair in the heart which his friend knew was sincere. He snapped his fingers—a familiar gesture with him when he wished to recover his courage—and ‘simply said, “Well, well,” and put a literary question to his astonished friend, so that the two writers were talking of the last book of one of their colleagues when a slackening of the pace of the cab, compelled to take its turn with the others, and then the crunching of wheels upon gravel, told them they had reached their destination. René felt his heart again beating as before. The carriage stopped in front of a doorway covered by an awning, and the young man had a dreamy sensation as he found himself in the ante-room he had once before traversed in daylight. Several servants in livery stood in this apartment, which was full of flowers and heated by invisible pipes. The coats and cloaks arranged upon a table and couch showed that the company were all present in the reception rooms, the sounds from which were quite audible. A young woman was in the ante-room, being divested by a valet of her fur, after the removal of which her fine figure, bare shoulders and red costume came into view. She had a delicate profile, slightly arched nose, and a *spirituelle* mouth. Diamonds glistened in her soft blonde hair. René saw her greet Claude with a motion of the head, and he felt himself turn pale as he encountered two eyes which rested upon him a glance of indifference, and they were clear blue eyes, while her complexion was of that rosiness which is so common in the fresh and delicate type.

“That is Madam Moraines, the daughter of Victor Boiſ-Dauffin, the old Imperial Minister.” Claude’s phrase, uttered as if in response to a mute interrogation, often came back to René’s mind. He often asked himself what strange chance led him to meet, at the precise moment of his entrance to that function, the woman of all others who exercised the greatest influence over him? But then he did not experience any of those presentiments which sometimes grip us when we find ourselves face to face with a creature who will be very kind or cruel to us. The vision of this beautiful young woman of thirty, who had disappeared while he and Claude were waiting for their cloak-room tickets, was mingled in the whole impression which the novelty of everything gave him. Without his knowing it the softness of the carpets beneath his feet, the magnificence of the decoration of the vestibule, the height of the ceiling the clothes of the guests, and the reflection of the lights, entered very largely into this impression, which was a strange mixture of torturing timidity and delightful sensuality. When on his first visit to the Countess he had felt himself enveloped by the thousand imponderable atoms which float in an atmosphere of great luxury. Persons born in opulence no more perceive these infinite shades of sensation than we perceive the weight of the air which surrounds us. People do not feel things they have always felt. Nor do the parvenus mention these things. They have an instinct which makes them bury such impressions in the bottom of their hearts as plebeian and common. René, besides, had no time to reflect upon the distinction of the

sentiments which took possession of him. The doors were again opened and he entered the first drawing-room, which was furnished with that composite luxury found in great modern houses in Paris. When a person has seen one he has seen five hundred. In the young man's eyes the tiniest details of this luxurious furniture appeared to be signs of the greatest aristocraticness, from the old upholsterings of the couches to the tapestry with its enormous figures representing a triumph of Bacchus, the god himself appearing above the fire-place. The first drawing-room, of medium size, communicated by a wide opening with another and much larger one, in which, judging by the sounds of conversation, all the guests were assembled. René took in the appearance of the place at a glance, with the over-excitement of the faculties which some maddening forms of timidity give to very young men. He saw Madame Moraines' red dress disappear into the further room upon the arm of a black coat, and before the fire-place of the small drawing-room, beneath the tapestry, Countess Komof talking, in the midst of a group, with great facial display and excessive gestures. She was a woman of almost tragic appearance, big, but with shoulders too narrow for the rest of her body, white hair, features rather masculine and grey eyes of unbearable brightness. She was wearing a dark costume, which all the better displayed the magnificence of the jewels with which she was covered, and her hands, which she was waving as she talked, displayed barbaric rings with enormous sapphires, emeralds and diamonds. She replied with a smile to the salutation Claude and René

gave her. She was just bringing to an end a story of a spiritualistic *séance*—her favourite occupation.

"The table rose, rose, rose," she said, "our fingers could hardly follow it; then the candles were blown out, and in the darkness I saw a hand hovering, an enormous hand, that of Peter the Great."

Her features were disturbed as she spoke, her eyes became fixed in a vision of fear. The instinctive being, almost wild, and nearly on the verge of madness, which is often found even in the most refined of Russians appeared for a few seconds upon her face. Then the great lady suddenly recollected that she had to do the honours of her house. The smile returned to her lips, the brilliancy of her eyes decreased. One of those divinations elderly women have, which when they are good make them delightful company for men of nervous irritability, told her that René already felt himself in the midst of solitude in this large drawing-room where he knew nobody. So she gracefully addressed him as soon as her story was ended.

"Do you believe in spirits, Mr Vincy? Yes, for you are a poet. But we will talk about the subject another day. You must come with me, although I am neither young nor pretty, and be introduced to a few friends who are already your passionate admirers."

She took the young man's arm. Although he was tall she was half a head the taller. Her tragic face did not lie. She had experienced the destiny the character of her strange eyes and violent physiognomy led one to suppose. Her husband had been killed almost before her eyes, while she herself had killed his assassin. René had heard the story from Claude, and he could see

the scene in his mind's eye: Count Komof, a distinguished political personage, stabbed by a Nihilist conspirator at his desk, the Countess coming in by accident and dropping the murderer with a revolver shot. She had picked up the pistol with the same long hand which, now loaded with rings, rested upon René's black sleeve, as she began to tell him another story, with that sort of animal energy which is to be found in Slav organisations, even in the most cultured of them.

"I came to Paris eight years ago after the war. I had not been here since the first Exhibition in 1855. Ah! sir, the Paris of those days was a charming, delightful place, and your Emperor an ideal man." She emphasised the last syllables of her words when she wished to show her enthusiasm. "Now, my daughter, Princess Roudire—you do not know her, she lives in Florence all the year round—was with me. She fell ill, but her life was saved by Doctor Louvet; you know him, a thin man. I always call him Louvetsky, because he only attends Russians. I could not think of taking her far from Paris. This house was for sale furnished. I bought it. But I have altered everything. Look, this was the garden."

She pointed out to René the large drawing-room which they had just entered. It formed a sort of vast hall, the walls of which disappeared beneath canvases of every size and every school, collected by the Countess in the course of her European wanderings. If the first impression of material luxury had been so strong upon René, that of this other sort, mental, as it might be called, which cosmopolitanism represents, was more powerful still. The way in which the Countess had

pronounced the name of Florence, as if it were a suburb of Paris, the facility of existence which her unexpected installation in this palace represented, the way in which the great Russian lady spoke French, like a young man accustomed to the confined horizon of middle-class Parisian family life, at coming in contact with these details, which were so new to him, was he not struck by a sort of childish admiration? He opened his eyes to absorb all the charm of the picture which the room presented at that moment. At the back, on the left, dark red curtains, now lowered, masked the stage, erected for the occasion in the large dining-room which usually opened into the hall, as the three steps visible beneath the curtain showed. In the middle stood a marble column, surmounted by a bronze bust representing the famous Nicolas Komof, the friend of Czar Peter, and around this ancestor four enormous shrubs were growing in copper vases of Persian make. Between this sort of family monument and the lowered curtain of the stage rows of chairs were arranged. Now almost all the feminine portion of the audience had taken their places, and it was, beneath the glow of the lustres, like a living landscape of naked shoulders, some thin, others most admirably shaped, of blonde or black hair, of faces lit up by brown or blue eyes, and of slender and robust arms. Fans waved, jewels gleamed, words and laughter mingled into a great indistinct sound. The rustle of the ladies' dresses in the half of the room where they were made a striking contrast to the dark mass of black coats in the other half. A few women were still standing among the men, and a few men seemed as if lost

among the chairs where the women chatted. This Society, though very mixed, was composed of persons accustomed for years to continually attending meeting-places which served as neutral territory to the different grades of Society. There were present most aristocratic duchesses, whose sporting and charitable tastes took them everywhere. There were also the wives of financiers and diplomats, the whole series of cosmopolitan elegance, and even ordinary artists' wives engaged in the pursuit of their husbands' fortunes through dinners in town and receptions. But to a new-comer like René Vincy none of the social peculiarities which divided this drawing-room into a series of small and most distinct groups were perceptible. He was looking at the spectacle, which, as a first impression of paraded luxury, surpassed all his youthful anticipations. In the midst of the hum of conversation he was introduced to a few of the men he met upon his way, and a few of the women in the last row of chairs. He bowed and murmured a few words of reply to the compliments the most amiable of them uttered. Madame Komof, who saw his confusion, was good enough not to leave him, the more so as Claude, without doubt a victim of another crisis in his passion, had disappeared. He must have gone into the wings, and when the three taps for the curtain to rise sounded the poet naturally found himself sitting by the Countess, in the shade of one of the shrubs which surrounded her ancestor's column. How fortunate there was one place where he could escape all eyes.

CHAPTER IV

SIGISBEE

Two servants in livery raised the curtains, and a miniature stage came into view. As the scene was simply described, "In a garden in Venice," the scenery had been reduced to a drop-scene at the back and groups of plants borrowed from the Countess's famous conservatories. With their stiff foliage and lustrous leaves these exotic shrubs made a very different setting to that which the fancy of M. Perrin had created at the Comédie Française. The artistic stage manager had reproduced one of those terraces upon the lagoon, which descend to the clear water by steps of white marble, with palace façades and red columns upon the blue horizon, and disappearing black gondolas at the curve of the canals. The novelty of the scenery, the small stage, the restricted circle of the audience and its select character, all contributed to the increase of René's confusion. He had another attack of that mad beating of the heart which had seized him at the theatre doors on the evening of the first performance. There was a burst of applause at Colette Rigaud's first appearance upon the stage. The actress made a smiling inclination of the head; and even in her Watteau costume, copied from one of the great painter's pictures, with her powdered hair, a

beauty spot at the corner of her smile and rouge upon her pale cheeks, she retained some of the tenderness which came from her eyes and mouth, while the eyes in their sad dreaminess, the mouth in its melancholy sensuality were like those which Botticelli gives to his Madonnas and angels. How often had René heard Claude lament, "When she has lied to me, and she looks at me with those eyes of hers, I begin to pity her for her infamy instead of being angry with her." Colette began to recite the first lines of her part with her fine though a trifle full lips, and René's anguish reached its highest pitch as he heard around him the almost outspoken criticisms which fashionable folk indulge in when an artiste plays in a drawing-room. "She is very pretty." "Do you think she is wearing the same costume as she does at the theatre?" "Well, she is too thin for my taste." "What a sympathetic voice!" "No, she imitates Sarah Bernhardt too closely." "I adore this play. What do you think of it?" "The lines send me to sleep." The poet's strained ears caught these exclamations, and others as well. They were repressed by a "Hush!" from a group of young people quite close to René, among whom was noticeable a bald man with a prominent nose and a congested face. The Countess gave him a gesture of thanks, and turning to her neighbour: "That is M. Salvaney," she said. "He is madly in love with Colette."

Silence was restored, a silence hardly broken by the sounds of breathing, the rustle of dresses and the waving of fans. René was now listening to the music of his own verses with a delightful intoxication, for at

this silence, and the approving murmurs which soon arose, he realised, he felt that his work gripped the fashionable audience in this drawing-room as it had done the house on the first night at the Théâtre Française, composed though it was of tired writers, *blasé* men about town and courtesans. An inner hallucination took the young man back in spite of himself to the period when he had imagined, then written, the farce which that evening had brought him a new and delightful tremor of self-conceit after having so profoundly revolutionised his life. He could see himself during the previous spring pacing the avenues of the Luxembourg garden at dusk, and the mystery of the approaching night, the aroma of the flowers, the dark azure of the sky visible through the sparse foliage, the marble of the statues of the queens, all the landscape had intoxicated him, the more so as Rosalie walked by his side in silence. She had such a candid way of looking at him with her black eyes, in which he could read an unconscious and passionate love! That evening he had spoken of love there amid the perfume of the early lilies, while the voice of Madame Offarel as she talked to Emilie indistinctly reached them. He had returned to the Rue Cœtlogon a prey to that fever of hope which brings tears to the verge of the eyes, the heart to the edge of the lips, and moves a person to the roots of his being. It had been impossible for him to sleep, and there, alone in his chamber, he had in comparison with Rosalie recalled his first and only mistress, a girl from the Latin Quarter called Elise. He had met her in a beer-house, into which he had been dragged by his only two friends. Elise

was pretty, although faded, with black rims round her eyes, powder all over her face, and carmine on her lips. She took a fancy to him, and although she displeased him in every way, by her gestures, by her thoughts, by her voice and her sensations, he became her lover; this sad intrigue lasted six months, and remained with him as a bitter memory. He had, in spite of himself, become attached to this girl, being one of those persons whose pleasure leads to affection, and he had cruelly suffered because of her coquetry, of her common heart and the foundation of moral infamy upon which the poor creature lived. Sitting at his writing-table and thinking with ecstasy of Rosalie's purity, he had conceived the idea of a poem in which he would contrast a coquette on the one part, and on the other a young girl true and tender. Then, as he was an ardent reader of Shakespeare's and de Musset's comedies, his vulgar adventure had by a strange and sincere metamorphosis taken the shape of an Italian fantasy. He had that very night sketched upon paper the plan of *Sigisbée* and composed fifty verses. It was the simple story of a young Venetian gentleman, Lorenzo, who was enamoured of a cold and cruel coquette, Princess Coelia. The unhappy man wasted his heart and tears in courting this implacable beauty; then, acting on the advice of a young Marquis of Sénéce, a French *roué* on his travels in Venice, he affected, in order to pique Coelia, to become enamoured of the pretty and sweet Countess Beatrice. He then discovered that the latter had loved him for a long while, and when Coelia, caught in his trap, tried to captivate him again, Lorenzo, warned by his experience, said "No" to the

treacherous beauty, whose sorrowing Sigisbée he had been, to entirely surrender himself to the charms of the woman who knew how to love.

Colette in the part of Coelia was speaking. Lorenzo was bewailing his fate. The *roué* sneered. Beatrice was dreaming. This little world, from the land of Benedict, Perdican, Rosalinde and *As You Like It*, came and went in a gleam of poesy, as slender and caressing as a ray of moonlight. Now and then voices sounded from the groups of ladies as they uttered a "Charming," or an "Exquisite," and René remembered the nights of toil, a month, consecrated to modelling and re-modelling one or other of these lines; for instance, the elegy written by Lorenzo in a note which at that very moment Coelia was showing Beatrice. How tender and mocking was Colette's voice as she uttered her lines.

Then the retrospective hallucination redoubled, recalling to René his quiet room and the inner joy he felt at getting up each morning to resume his interrupted task. By Claude's advice, and also urged on by a childish imitation of great men's ways—that laughable and delightful trait in real youthful *litterateurs*—he had adopted the method Balzac practised. Going to bed before eight in the evening he got up before four o'clock in the morning. He lit his own fire and lamp, prepared the previous evening by his thoughtful sister, who had also arranged everything so that he could make coffee almost without disturbing himself, by the aid of a spirit lamp. The fire crackled, the lamp flickered, and the aroma of the inspiring liquid filled the close room. He looked

piously at Rosalie's portrait and began to work. Bit by bit the roar of Paris increased, its awakening into life became perceptible. He put down his pen to gaze at one or another of the etchings which hung upon the walls or to turn over the pages of a book. About six o'clock Emilie came in. Amid her household duties his faithful sister found time day by day to recopy the verses her brother had written. Not for the world would she have allowed one of René's MSS. to go through the hands of readers and correctors. Poor Emilie! How happy would she have been to hear the applause drown Colette's voice, and how perfect would René's pleasure have been if the sensation of change of soul which had taken place in him as far as Rosalie was concerned had not caused him a vague feeling of sadness, even at the moment the piece ended in a burst of unanimous applause!

"You have scored a wonderful success," the Countess told the young man. "All the ladies will be quarrelling over you." Then, as if in support of what could only be the flattery of a gracious hostess, the young man could hear, amid the tumult which accompanied the conclusion of the piece, all sorts of phrases through the rustling of dresses, the noise of chairs being moved, and the exchange of greetings. "There is the author." "Where?" "That young man!" "So young!" "Do you know him?" "He is a handsome fellow." "Why does he wear his hair so long?" "I myself like those artistic heads." "A man can be clever and arrange his hair like anyone else." "His comedy is delightful." "Delightful." "Delightful." "Do you know who intro-

duced him to the Countess?" "Claude Larcher." "Poor Larcher! Look how he is hovering round Colette." "Salvaney and he will fight one of these days." "So much the better, that will cool their blood." "Are you staying for supper?" Those were a few samples of the phrases René distinguished, with that fineness of hearing common to authors, while he was bowing, with a blush upon his cheeks, at the ponderous compliments of a woman who had just carried him off almost by force from Madame Komof. She was a tall, spare woman of about fifty, the widow of a M. de Sermoises, who, since his death, had become "My poor Sermoises," though in his lifetime he had been the talk of the club because of his partner's conduct. The latter, as she grew old, had passed from love to literature, but to a thoughtful literature tinged with devoutness. She had vaguely learned from the Countess that the author of *Sigisbée* was the nephew of a priest; and besides, the romantic character overhanging the little comedy made her believe that the young author would never have anything in common with real literature, the tendencies of which she virtuously cursed, and she said to René, with the solemnity of doctrinal affectation which she brought to the enunciation of her ideas—a judge delivering his sentence displays no greater implacable haughtiness:

"Ah, sir! what poetry! what divine grace! It is Watteau from the pen. And what sentiment! This piece will form an epoch, sir—yes, an epoch. You avenge us, the other women, upon the so-called analysts who seem to write their books with a scalpel."

"Madam," the young man stammered, overwhelmed by her extraordinary phraseology.

"I shall have the pleasure of seeing you at my house, shall I not?" she went on. "I am at home on Fridays from five to seven. I dare to believe that you will prefer the society of my drawing-room to that of the dear Countess, who is, as you know, a foreigner. I have some of those gentlemen from the Institute who do me the great honour of consulting me upon their work. I have myself written a little poetry. Oh! quite unpretentious, a few verses to the memory of poor M. de Sermoises, a little thing I have called 'Lilies of the Tomb.' You shall tell me your opinion of it in all sincerity. Madam Hurault—M. Vincy," she went on as she introduced the author to a woman of forty, still elegant in attire and appearance. "Exquisite, is it not? Watteau from the pen."

"You must greatly admire Alfred de Musset, sir," the new-comer said. She was the wife of a man of the world, the author, who wrote under the name of Florac, of a few plays, which had fallen very flat in spite of Madam Hurault's prodigious intriguing, since for sixteen years she had not given a dinner without some critic, theatre manager, or a relative of either being present.

"Who does not love him at my age?" the young man replied.

"I said to myself, as I listened to your beautiful lines," Madam Hurault went on, "it had the same effect upon me as music I had heard before." Then after she had launched her epigram she remembered that in every young poet sleeps a future novelist, and

she corrected the phrase which displayed her cruel woman's envy of a colleague by an invitation. "I hope to have the pleasure of seeing you at my house, sir; my husband will make your acquaintance with the greatest of pleasure. I'm always at home on Friday from five to seven."

"Madam Ethorel—M. Vincy," Madam de Sermoises said as she introduced René again, but this time to a young and very pretty woman, a brunette with a soft, amber-tinted complexion, big velvety eyes, and an almost fragile delicacy, which contrasted strongly with her serious voice.

"Ah! sir," she began, "you know how to speak to the heart. I am particularly fond of the sonnet Lorenzo recites. It is adorable! I am at home on Saturday from five to seven. Oh! I only have just a few friends, if you will do me the honour of calling."

René had no time to thank her before Madam de Sermoises, a victim of that strange delirium of reflected vanity which gives some men, as well as certain women, the irresistible and nearly naïve need of making themselves the showman of every person in sight, dragged him into a fresh introduction. In this way he had to greet Madam Abel Mosé, the most brilliant beauty of the Jewish colony, all in white; then Madam de Saure in red, and Madam Bernard in blue. Then Madame Komof came back to take him to the Countess de Candale, the proud-eyed descendant of the terrible fifteenth-century marshal, and the sister of the Duchess d'Arcole. These two very French names were followed by others impossible to remember at once, the names of a few of the Countess's relatives,

and besides he exchanged hand-shakes with the men who were in the ladies' company. In this way René made the acquaintance of the Marquis de Hère, the most steadfast of the smart set, who, with an income of twenty thousand francs lived up to fifty thousand; the Viscount de Brèves on the verge of bankruptcy for the third time; de Crucé, the collector; San Giobbe, the famous Italian shot, and three or four Russians. The names of most of these fashionable ladies and club men were familiar to the poet through reading them childishly and with foolish avidity in the accounts of the fashionable gatherings in the newspapers for the edification of the young citizens who dream of Society. He had formed beforehand of this Society, more wealthy than aristocratic, and rather European than French, which took precedence in Parisian gaiety, so fascinating, and at the same time utterly false an idea that he was at once delighted and disconcerted at the realisation of one of his oldest dreams. There was something in the luxury which enchanted him, while his success elated his author's vanity. He encountered smiles upon such tempting mouths, and flattering glances from such beautiful eyes, that, while caressing his soul, maddened him with timidity, all the while the constantly-changing faces inflicted upon him an impression of bewilderment, and the banality of the compliments an involuntary disillusionment. What makes Society intolerable even to nausea to many artists is that they enter it to display themselves and expect something extraordinary, while the persons who really belong to the aristocracy sit more in the atmosphere

of a drawing-room with the naturalness and simplicity of daily custom. This indefinable feeling drove René to seek out his friend Claude, but he could not find him. His eyes could only light upon Colette, who, having descended from the stage with her bright-coloured, old-fashioned costume and powdered blonde hair, made a piquant contrast in colour to the black coats which surrounded her. She, too, was obviously uneasy—a little enervation in her smile, a shade of defiance in her look and the rapid way she opened and shut her fan proved this; it was the unrest of the actress suddenly transported outside her surroundings, at the same time proud and troubled by the attention she inspired. She gave René a smile which betrayed real pleasure at finding some one of her own kind. She was engaged in a conversation with the person with the brick-coloured complexion whom René learned from the Countess was Salvaney, Claude's rival.

"Ah! here is my author," she said as she held out her hand to the poet. "Ah, well! you ought to be very pleased this evening. What a success! Come, Salvaney, compliment M. Vincy, although you did not hear any of it. And your friend Larcher," she went on, "has he disappeared? Tell him from me that he nearly made me die laughing upon the stage. He looked like a weeping willow. To whom was he playing the part of Antony?"

There was at that moment a look of cruelty in the young woman's green eyes, in the curl of her lips, and a sort of hatred arising from the fact that the unhappy Claude had gone without wishing her

good-bye. She loved him in her fashion, though she deceived, tortured and treated him as her slave. She felt a sort of satisfied spite in thus jesting at him before Salvaney, and in telling herself that simple René would repeat her words to his friend.

"Why do you talk like that?" the young man replied in a low voice, taking advantage of the opportunity presented by the actress's companion greeting a friend. "You know very well he loves you."

"Quite true," Colette said aloud with an evil-sounding laugh. "You swallow anything. I know the story. I am his evil genius, his fatal woman, his Delilah. I have a whole packet of letters in which he tells such stories. That does not prevent him from getting as drunk as a lord, under the pretext of keeping away from me. I made him gamble, perhaps, drink and take drugs? Well then!" and she shrugged her pretty shoulders before continuing more gaily: "The Countess is making a sign to us, only the friends and ourselves are left. Now, Salvaney, your arm, let us go to supper."

Time had indeed passed quickly amid these successive introductions, and René, whom Colette's words suddenly aroused from his astonishment, could see that the number of people in the drawing-rooms had greatly diminished. The Countess had only invited about thirty of her guests to the supper which was to conclude the evening. She herself gave the signal to ascend to the floor above, where supper was laid, taking the arm of the chief of her guests, an ambassador then

very popular in Paris. The couples formed and followed her up a narrow staircase, which was decorated with bronzes and marvellous carved wood from Italy. Here was reached a sort of gallery, which was furnished as a boudoir, though a drawing-room in size. In the centre was a long table decorated with flowers, loaded with fruit, and sparkling with silver and glass. By each plate shone a sort of red globe cased in green, inside which an invisible candle burned—an English novelty which was greeted with acclamations by the guests as they chose their seats at the table. René, who, from timidity, had ascended the stairs by himself nearly last, took an empty chair between the Viscount de Brèves and the blonde young woman in a red dress whom he had seen in the ante-room, the woman whom Claude Larcher had said was Madam Moraines, the daughter of the famous Bois-Dauffin, one of Napoleon III.'s most unpopular ministers. Lost at this corner of the table when conversation between Madam Moraines and the person on her right and the Viscount and his neighbour was in progress, René was able to spend a few moments in recovering his self-possession and watching the guests, behind whom the servants came and went carrying dishes and pouring out wine. His eyes travelled from Colette, who was laughing and flirting with Salvaney, to Madam Komof, no doubt engaged in recounting some new spiritualistic experience of her own; for her eyes had again assumed their almost unbearable brightness, her features were disturbed, and her large hand moved, making the stones in her rings gleam, without her taking any notice of the people sitting at the table, so courteous though she

usually was, and careful to please every one of her guests. The feeling of solitude was stronger upon the young man than it had been before, even to the point of becoming painful, either because the intensity of his sensations had exhausted his nerves, or because the sudden passing from his success to his momentary solitude was a symbol of the little value of the world's infatuation. Of the women who had overwhelmed him with flattery some had gone; others had quite naturally taken their seats with their usual friends. At the opposite end of the table he could see his fellow in the actor who had taken the part of Lorenzo, and who had with Colette been the only one of the company to stay to supper; he was sitting straight and stiff in his evening dress, while he ate and drank heartily without exchanging a word with anyone. In this state of mind René began to observe the lady next to him, by whose grace he had been much struck on meeting her in the vestibule. He was not mistaken in his first estimate of her as a creature accomplished and aristocratic. Everything about her gave a sensation of distinction, almost of too much prettiness, from the delicacy of her features to the shapeliness of her figure and her tiny wrists. Her hands seemed fragile, so tapering and transparent were her fingers. The fault of this kind of beauty lies in its very charm. Being excessive, the delicacy changes into morbidity and the fine grace into mannerisms. In the case of Madam Moraines a more attentive study caused a person to make the discovery that the graceful exterior enveloped a creature of strength, and that this exquisite slenderness concealed a really living woman,

whose health showed itself by all sorts of signs. The pretty head rested upon an energetic neck, where the pale gold hair curled in close, thick locks. No boneness disfigured her full shoulders. When she smiled she displayed pointed white teeth, and the way in which she did justice to the supper proved that her stomach had resisted without difficulty the numerous causes of fatigue which weigh upon fashionable women, from the pressure of their corsets to exhausting evenings, without mentioning daily dinners in town. Madam Moraines' eyes of a pale soft blue ought to recall to a dreamer memories of Ophelia and Desdemona; while the freshness of the pupils betokened good sleep, in which the temperament was entirely repaired, just as the brilliancy of the complexion denoted rich blood and freedom from anæmia. To a philosophical doctor, the contrast between the almost ideal charm of her face and the évident materialism of her physiology would have furnished a pretext for distrustful reflections. But the young man, who was stealthily gazing at the woman as he toyed with the food upon his plate, was a poet, that is to say, the antithesis of a doctor and philosopher. Instead of analysis he began to enjoy her proximity. Without suspecting it he had that evening been bewitched by sensuality which was, so to speak, exemplified by this woman in her admirable points, while around her floated a subtle and penetrating aroma. A faithful disciple of the masters of Parnassus, he had, for a period of his youth, experienced the childish mania for perfumes, and he deeply inhaled that fine soft odour; he recognised it as white heliotrope, and he remembered that one day,

a victim of the nostalgia of refined tenderness, he mentioned it in one of his poems.

Invincibly the naïve desire he had expressed to Claude Larcher, while the carriage brought them, that of being loved by a woman like the one to whose pretty laugh he was at that moment listening, again entered his head. Oh! it was a mirage! The hour would pass without him exchanging even a word with this dream-woman, who was further from him than if she had been a thousand leagues away. Did she even know of his existence? At the very moment he was formulating this sad certainty he felt his heart beating more quickly. Madam Komof, having recovered from her exaltation at the commencement of the supper, had without a doubt noticed the look of distress on the young man's face; from the opposite end of the table she launched this phrase at the Viscount de Brèves: "Will you be good enough to introduce M. Vincy to the lady next to him?" René saw the beautiful blue eyes turn towards him, the blonde head bow, and a smile of sympathy form upon that mouth he had just in thought compared to a flower, so fresh, pure and red was it. He expected from Madam Moraines the commonplace compliment with which he had been overwhelmed all the evening, and he was surprised that the young woman, instead of at once mentioning his play, said to him simply, as a continuation with him of the conversation she had just been having with her neighbour:

"We were talking to M. Crucé of the talent M. Perrin displays in mounting plays. Do you remember, sir, his setting of the *Sphinx*?"

She spoke in a soft, sweet voice, which, like her type of beauty, had an indefinable attraction and completed the irresistibility of the woman's charm to those who felt it. René had the sensation of being enveloped by her voice, as well as by the perfume which he inhaled still more now she had turned towards him. It needed an effort for him to reply, so much did the sensation affect him. Did Madam Moraines notice his confusion? Was she flattered by it as every woman is flattered by receiving the homage of a timidity which cannot be disguised? Still, she knew the art of traversing the first stages of conversation, so difficult between a woman of the world and a nervous admirer, and accomplished it with so much grace that after ten minutes René was talking almost confidentially to her, expounding, with some amount of natural eloquence, his ideas upon the stage. He expressed himself in passionate eulogy of the performances organised by Richard Wagner at Bayreuth, as his friends had described them to him. Madam Moraines listened, looking at him in the way drawing-room actresses do the famous man whom they have determined to captivate. If René had been told that this ideal person cared for Wagner and music as much as for her first long dress, and that she was only really happy at little operatic theatres, he would have been as greatly stupefied as if the joyful chatter which just then made the table cheerful had been changed into shrieks of terror. Colette, who had without a doubt drunk a little drop more champagne than was absolutely necessary, was laughing a trifle too loudly, close to him. Familiar names were exchanged

by the guests, and amid this noise he heard the young woman's voice say to him:

"How good it is to meet a poet who feels really as a poet should! I thought the species was extinct. Will you believe me?" she added with a smile, which, reversing the parts, transformed the woman of the world into a person overawed by undisputed superiority, "just now in the drawing-room I was going to ask to be introduced to you. I enjoyed *Sigisbée* so much! Then I said to myself, 'What is the use?' See how chance has placed us side by side. You did not seem to be enjoying yourself very much," she went on cleverly, "though it was such a success."

"Ah, madam," he said, "if you only knew you would consider me most ungrateful. All the ladies were most charming and indulgent to me. But I cannot explain the reason their compliments chilled me."

"As mine have done also," she said; then added carelessly, "Do you go into Society a great deal?"

"You will not laugh at me too much," the young man said, with that natural grace which was his great charm, "this is my first appearance; yes, before this affair," he added, reading curiosity in the eyes of the woman he was addressing, "I only knew Society from the novels I have read. I am a true savage, you see."

"But," she said, "how do you spend your evenings?"

"I have worked very hard till just lately," he replied. "I live with my sister and I hardly know anyone."

"Who introduced you to the Countess?" Madam Moraines inquired.

"A friend of mine whom you are sure to know—Claude Larcher."

"A charming man," she said, "who has only one fault, that of thinking much evil of women. Do not believe all he says," she added, with her rather timid smile, "or you will be spoiled. The poor fellow has always had a weakness for falling in love with coquettes and thinking all women are the same."

As she uttered this phrase her eyes expressed the most delicate sorrow. Her pretty face showed everything, from the pride of a person who has suffered, as a woman, from the cruelty of a woman-hating writer, to pity for Claude, and also a kind of discreet fear lest René were induced to hold a bad opinion of affairs of the heart, which implied a mute esteem for his nature. Silence ensued, during which the young man was surprised to find himself rejoicing at his friend's absence. He would have suffered, if it had been necessary for him, after this supper, to listen to outrageous paradoxes like those Colette's jealous lover had uttered in the carriage during the drive from the Rue Cœtlogon to the Rue Bel Respiro. Ah, how right he had been to inwardly protest against Claude's jaundiced theories, even before knowing one of these Society ladies towards whom he was attracted by an invincible hope of meeting one to love without return. He listened to Madam Moraines talking of the melancholy which so often mundane life concealed, of the secret virtues which were dissimulated beneath apparent frivolity, of the works of charity, for example,

in which she herself and some of her friends took part. She said that simply and softly, without a single intonation betraying anything more than a profound love of the good and beautiful, and then with a sort of divine shame at having thus 'displayed her sentiments, and as the guests were preparing to leave the table:

"That is a very strange conversation for supper," she went on. "So much can be said between five and seven that I dare not ask you to call upon me. When you pass on Opera days, before dinner, I am always at home. You shall see my husband, who is ~~not~~ here this evening. He is indisposed. He desired me to come because the Countess had begged us to do so. It proves," she added, as she shook hands with the young man, "that one is sometimes recompensed for performing duties, even in Society."

CHAPTER V

THE DAWN OF LOVE

THE attacks of new sensations had been so violent and so numerous upon René Vincy throughout the entire evening that it was impossible for him to exactly discern their details in the time it took him to walk from the Rue Bel Respiro to the Rue Cœtlogon. If Claude had not suddenly left the Countess Komof's house a victim of the pangs of deceived love, the two friends would have returned together. They would have enjoyed, in the deserted streets, beneath the chill stars, one of those three-o'clock-in-the-morning talks in which young men returning from a *fête* tell one another all that is in their hearts. Perhaps then, simply through Madam Moraines' name, René would have understood what place in his thoughts had been taken by this fine, rare beauty in whom seemed to be incarnate and rendered palpable all the glories of aristocracy. Perhaps he would have obtained from Claude some just ideas upon the character and difference there is between a fashionable woman like Madam Moraines and a really great lady, and he would have been spared the dangerous fever of imagination which made him delight, throughout his walk, in the memory of the face and most trifling gestures of Suzanne. He had heard the Countess call her by this

pretty name when she kissed her and wished her good-bye, and he pictured her in her cloak, with its white fur, which was so thick that it made her blonde head appear almost too small. He saw again in his mind's eye the motion of her head, her slight inclination in his direction before getting into her carriage. He saw her also at the supper-table, the glance from her beautiful eyes, and the way in which she moved her lips to utter those simple words, every one of which had proved to him that she had a beautiful soul as well as a beautiful body, in the same way that she had a beauty worthy of the setting in which it appeared. He hardly noticed his long walk a third of the way across Paris. He contemplated the sky above his head, the water of the Seine as it flowed darkly on, and the long rows of gas lamps, which seemed to make the intervening darkness of the streets all the blacker. This night seemed to him so vast—vast as his impression of his own life. The state of mind of poets who are only poets makes them the victims of an indefinite frame of mind which may be called the lyric state: it is like the anticipated intoxication of hope or despair, according as that quality of prodigiously amplifying present sensations applies to joy or sorrow. This entry into Society, which at that moment assumed in his childish mind a semblance of the revival of his destiny, what was it all together? Hardly a glance cast through a half-open door which supposed to become profitable, a series of insignificant actions of which an ambitious person would have thought. The ambitious one would have asked himself what impression he had produced, what characters

he had met, and among the drawing-rooms to which he had the *entrée*, how many were worth a single visit, how many assiduous frequenting. Instead of that the poet found himself floating in an atmosphere of felicity. The pleasantness of the latter portion of the evening cast a reflection over all the rest. He even forgot the distressful quarter of an hour he had passed. This was his frame of mind when he reached his own door. The antithesis between the society he had just left and that to which he returned was pleasant to note as he opened the big door and crept on tiptoe to his room. Did not this antithesis give to his actual joy all the piquancy of fantasy? Then, as he was at the age when the repair of nervous fatigue takes place with perfect regularity through the most irregular movements of the thoughts and sensations, he was no sooner in bed than he fell into a deep sleep. If he dreamed of magnificent introductions, applause in the great drawing-room, of Madam Moraines' somewhat delicate profile, appearing so fine beneath her blonde hair, he could not have said so when he awoke the following morning about ten.

A ray of sunlight had penetrated into the room through the closed shutters and drawn curtains. No sound entered from the little street, nor did any noise come from the interior of the flat to denote the morning life of the little household, the coming and going of the servant, and the hasty arrangement of the furniture and preparations for lunch. The young man was surprised at the silence. He looked at his watch to see how long he had slept; and he again experienced the sensation of which he never wearied: that of being

worshipped by his sister with that sort of overwhelming idolatry which extends from the greatest to the smallest events of existence. At the same time the memory of the previous evening came back to him. Twenty pictures floated in his brain all of which condensed into the fine features, clever mouth and blue eyes of Madam Moraines. He saw her even more distinctly than he had done the previous evening as she was when he left her; but the clearness of this vision and the infinite complaisance with which he prolonged it did not yet enlighten him as to the sentiment which had been born in him. It was an artist's impression and nothing more, as if the most graceful of the phantoms of women he had adored in his youth, through the pages of novelists and poets, had taken to itself a body under his eyes. Lying in the warm indolence of his bed he enjoyed the charm of this memory just as he enjoyed the interior aspect of his room, his family circle and his calm refuge. His gaze wandered voluptuously over all the objects visible in the half light, the table tidied by Emilie, the engravings which the sombre tonality of the red paper set off, the backs of his dear books, and the marble mantelpiece bearing a few photographs in leather frames. His mother's picture was there—poor mother, who had died before assisting at the realisation of her most ardent hopes, and who had been so proud of the fragments of poetry she chanced upon in tidying her son's room. His father's photograph was there too, a melancholy face indelibly stamped by drink. Very often René had thought that a kind of secret impuissance over his own will had been transmitted to

him by this unhappy man. But this particular morning, after the previous night's pleasure, he was not in the humour to reflect upon the sad patches of his life, and it was with childish joy that he tapped twice upon the wall. That was the way he called Françoise in the morning to come and open the curtains and shutters. Instead of the servant Emilie came in, and when the curtains had been drawn back it was his sister's affectionate and pleasant face the young man saw, with a smile of the most pronounced curiosity upon it.

"A triumph," he gaily replied to Emilie's mute interrogation.

The young woman clapped her hands like a child; she sat down at the foot of the bed upon a low chair and coaxingly said: "You will get up presently. Françoise shall bring your coffee. I guessed you would wake about ten. I was just finishing grinding the coffee when you knocked. You will have it quite fresh." As the servant came in, carrying a little porcelain cup and saucer in her red hands, "I am going to wait upon you," Emilie went on. "Fresneau has gone out with Constant. There is plenty of time, tell me about last night." Then René had to relate his last night's sensations, without omitting anything.

"What did Claude Larcher say?" his sister asked. "What was the courtyard and ante-room of the house like? What did the Countess wear?" She laughed at the fantastic metaphors of Madam de Sermoises. She cried, "What a disagreeable woman," as she listened to the epigrams of the author's wife; she laughed at pretty Madam Ethorel's ignorance; she

was angry at Colette's cruelty, and when the poet began to describe Madam Moraines' gracious profile, and repeat their conversation at the supper-table, she would have liked to thank the exquisite woman who at a glance had thus been able to distinguish her René. The habit she had for years acquired of living only by her brother's sensitiveness made her the most dangerous of confidants for him. She possessed the same imaginative nature as he did, the imagination of the artist, the lover of all that glitters, and she gave way to it without the least scruple, as it was on behalf of another. There is a sort of impersonal immorality, particular to women, which is that of mothers, sisters and mistresses. It consists in failing to perceive the laws of conscience as soon as the happiness of the man beloved is in question. Emilie, who, when she thought of herself, was the essence of abnegation and simplicity, caressed on her brother's behalf luxurious desires and vain ambitions, and she naïvely cried, giving a shape to thoughts René dared hardly admit to himself:

"Ah! I knew very well you would succeed. The Offarel ladies are quite mistaken, your place is not in our little world. You writers all need this ornamentation and magnificent life. How I wish you were rich! But you will be. One of these great ladies will become interested in you and marry you, and even in a palace you will not cease to be a brother who loves me. Well! was it possible for you to live like this always, here in a little room on the fourth floor with squalling children, a woman with the hands of a servant like mine"—and she showed her fingers, which bore traces

of needle-pricks—" and the necessity of working like a cabman to earn money. Here you have not had luxury, it is true, but I have given you leisure."

"Dear sister!" René said, moved to tears by the depths of the affection she displayed, and more so by the complicity which his secret covetousness met in this affection. Although Rosalie's name had never been uttered between them in a certain fashion, and Emilie had never received her brother's confidences, the latter knew very well his sister had guessed his innocent secret. He knew that with her ambitious views she would never have approved of the marriage. But would she have spoken as she had just done if she had known the complete details of his romance? Would she have advised treachery, for it was that of the sort which weighs most upon a heart born for nobleness; the sentimental treachery of a man who changes his love, and who anticipates, feels in advance the effect of the sorrow his irresistible perfidy will inflict. As soon as Emilie had gone, while dressing, René allowed himself to be occupied by ideas which his sister's last phrase had suggested to him, and for the first time he had the courage to face the situation. He remembered the little garden in the Rue de Bagneux, and the evening when he had placed his first kiss upon the young girl's blushing cheek. Certainly he had never been her lover—but those kisses, that clandestine betrothal? One truth appeared to him undisputed, that a man has no right to take a virgin's heart if he has not the strength to love her for ever. But he felt at the same time that his sister had uttered aloud the words he had been muttering to himself ever since the

success of his play had opened up to him horizons of hope. "This magnificent life," Emilie had murmured, and again the picture of the previous evening's display came to his mind, and again from this background of opulence Madam Moraines' face and smile stood out. The young man's loyalty, however, made an attempt to drive away this seductive apparition. He said aloud, "Poor Rosalie, how sweet she is, and how she loves me!" and he found a sort of egoistic pity in recalling the depth of this love he had inspired, a pity which stayed with him till lunch time. How simple was the spread, how unlike the sparkling suppertable of the previous evening. There were common white plates and rather thick glasses, on account of the combined clumsiness of Fresneau, Constant and Françoise, upon a cloth worked with coloured flowers. Fresneau, with his long beard and far-away look, ate quickly, his elbows upon the table, raising his knife to his mouth, for he was a man as common in manners as he was noble in heart; and, as if to make more striking the contrast between the impression of the leisured cosmopolitanism René had tasted, he narrated with a laugh the events of the morning. At seven o'clock he had taken a lesson at the Saint André school. From eight to ten he had in the same school taken a class of backward little boys. He had then only just time to get by omnibus to his third class in the Rue d'Astorg, quite close to Saint Augustin.

"I bought a paper on the way," the good fellow added, "to read the account of last evening's performance. I suppose I must have lost it," he went on, as he fumbled in his bag of books.

"You are so careless," Emilie said almost bitterly.

"Bah! old Offarel will tell us all about it," René said gaily; "you know he is my living index. He will have read by this evening all the Parisian and provincial newspapers."

Precisely because he was only too sure all the accounts of the previous evening's performance would be collected by Offarel and commented upon by the mother, René considered it his duty to Rosalie to himself give her all the details. Thus there is an instinct which drives a man—is it hypocrisy, or pity?—to such delicacy of proceeding with regard to a woman he is about to cease to love. Directly after lunch he therefore made his way to the Rue de Bagneux by way of the Rue de Vangirard. Formerly it had been his custom to call upon his friend at this time; and during the short walk he would compose for her one or two strophes, in the manner of Heine, which he read to her when they were alone. For a long time that power of thus walking in a dream had been denied him; but rarely had the vulgarity of that corner of Paris struck him to the same extent. Everything betokened the commonplace existence of the lower middle-classes, from the number of small shops to the display, extending almost to the middle of the pavement, of all sorts of bargains. On the restaurant windows were written the menus of their cheap dinners. Even the objects offered for sale seemed to be of a class which denoted poverty. These signs and twenty others brought to the young man's mind the calculated expenditure of small incomes, an existence reduced to that decent economy which has not the horrible and picturesque attraction

of real misery. When a man begins to love he finds in all the objects surrounding the beloved reasons for affection, and when he ceases to love, the same things furnish him with causes for widening the breach. Why did René become angry with Rosalie because of the impression of poverty the neighbourhood conveyed to him? Why did the appearance of the Rue de Bagneux set him against the young girl, just as if he had a personal grievance? This street had such a poor and deserted look, with the wall of the convent garden at the end of it, and its old houses. A wagon loaded with straw half blocked the way, its three horses standing with their nose-bags on, while the driver finished his dinner at a little eating-house. A Sister of Mercy was walking along the left-hand side of the street, with a large umbrella bulging beneath her arm; the wind shook the wings of her white head-dress, and her cross knocked against her blue dress. Why did René, after having associated with Rosalie all the displeasure of his sensations of poverty, involuntarily connect with Madam Moraines the movement of religious reverie which the Sister of Mercy's costume produced in his mind? The phrases the beautiful woman of the world had addressed to him at table the previous evening concerning the work of charity taken part in by so many great ladies; who are considered frivolous, came back to his mind. It was the third time since the morning that this woman's face had appeared to him, and each time more distinctly. If his good genius would only allow him to meet her in a lonely Paris street on her way to visit the poor! But instead of that he entered a passage at the end of

which was the courtyard which contained the door leading to the ground-floor flat occupied by the Offarels. Fired by the example of the Fresneaus, they too had realised the secret dream of every middle-class Parisian family, and taken a flat in this deserted neighbourhood, which had a garden about the size of a pocket-handkerchief.

“ Ah! M. René! ” Rosalie said, when she answered the young man’s ring. The Offarels only had one woman servant, who went home at mid-day. At the sight of the man she loved the poor child’s face, usually so pale, blushed with pleasure and she could not help uttering a little cry. “ How good it is of you to come and tell us at once about the success of your comedy! ” She ushered the young man into the dining-room, an apartment badly lighted by a north window, and not even warmed. Madam Offarel’s scrupulous avarice caused her, when the winter days were not too cold, to spare the expense of a fire by substituting, as far as she and her daughters were concerned, cloaks and mittens for it.

“ You see, ” the mother said to René, as she signed to him to sit down, “ we are counting the linen. ”

Upon the table a fortnight’s washing was spread out, from the father’s shirts to the girls’ underclothing. The bluey shades of the calicoes and cottons was made more distinct by the darkness of the room. It was the wardrobe of a poor family, which the girl at once realised was hardly likely to please the poet, for she prevented him taking the chair her mother indicated by saying:

"M. René will be better in the drawing-room, it is too dark here."

Before her mother had time to reply she pushed the visitor into the room honoured with the pompous title of drawing-room, though it really served as Angelique's study. The latter slightly augmented the family resources by the production of a few translations of English novels. She was at the time sitting near the window, writing at a little table. A dictionary lay at her feet, which for the sake of comfort were clad in old slippers. No sooner did she see René than she packed up her books and papers. She fled without being able to hide her untidy hair and dressing-gown with its missing buttons.

"Excuse me, M. René," she said with a laugh, "I am not presentable, so I cannot show myself."

The young man sat down and looked round the room he knew so well, the greatest ornament of which was a series of water-colours painted by the father in his spare time.

There was about a dozen of them, some representing landscapes he had studied on his Sunday walks, while the others were copies dear to Offarel's heart, and they were, like Gleyre's "*Illusions perdues*," precisely the pictures René's modern taste disliked the most strongly. A faded felt carpet, six chairs and a horse-hair couch completed the furniture of this room, which had formerly been loved by the poet as a symbol of almost idyllic simplicity, but which now seemed to him doubly odious because of his state of mind when he arrived and the bitterness with which Madam Offarel, thinking herself very clever, said to him:

"Ah, well, was it gay last evening in your smart society?" Without waiting for any reply she went on, "So your friend, M. Larcher, only visits folk now who have a grand establishment and a carriage? He talks of nothing but countesses, baronesses and princesses. Well, he can't be so very grand, for it is only ten years ago he was teaching."

• "Mother," Rosalie interrupted in a beseeching voice.

"But why has he always such an insolent look?" the old woman went on. "Yes, he looks at one as if he were saying, 'Poor devil!'"

"What a mistake you are labouring under as to his character," René replied; "he has rather a mania for smart society, it is true, but that is so natural in an artist. I myself," he went on with a smile, "was delighted to go last evening to see that palace, the flowers, the toilettes and the magnificence. Do you think that would prevent me from loving my modest home and old friends? We men of letters all have the rage for brilliant display; even Balzac had it. De Musset had it. It is a childish failing of no importance."

While the young man was speaking Rosalie cast in her mother's direction a glance which showed more happiness than her poor eyes had expressed for months. In making this admission and jesting about his most inward sensations, René was obeying a movement of the heart too complicated for the simple child to understand its machinery. He had seen by the anguish of the young girl's eyes, when Madam Offarel had begun speaking, that the secret of the attraction exercised

upon him by the mirage of elegance had not escaped the keen sight of the woman who loved him. He was a little ashamed at being so plebeian in his intoxication by luxury. He then talked of his impressions as if he had not been their dupe, partly to reassure Rosalie and to spare her useless pain, partly to allow himself that meanness without too much self-reproach. In certain natures—and the habit of moral division into two renders them common in authors—to tell one's faults is to pardon them. René delighted, while defending Claude Larcher, to recount the details of his own intoxication, with a tinge of irony which would have deceived cleverer observers than a child in love. While half mocking at what he called his own snob-bishness, which word of English origin he explained to the two women, he continued to give himself up to the misery of the little impressions which had continued to increase in him since the previous evening. He could not prevent himself from measuring in thought the abyss which separated the creatures he had mixed with at Madam Komof's—living roses reared in the hot-house of European aristocracy—from the little Parisian middle-class girl with her livid complexion, her fingers wearied by work, and her hair simply arranged, who was so modest in her attire that she was almost ungainly. Bit by bit the comparison became almost painful, and the young man was seized by one of those attacks of inner harshness which disconcerted his sweetheart. She always noticed them without ever understanding their cause. She knew René so well! She knew instinctively that two beings existed in him side by side, one gentle, good and tender, quick

to feel emotion, incapable of bearing pain, in short, the René she loved—and another dull, a stranger to her, and irritated against her. But she did not realise the tie which united these two beings. She understood that before the success of *Sigisbée* she had seen almost without exception the former of the two Renés, while since it, the second. She dared not say, “The unfortunate success.” She had been so proud of it. Still she would very much have liked to return to the time when her friend was unknown, poor and her own! How easily could his voice become hard, so hard indeed that even phrases addressed to someone else seemed to her, by their tone alone, directed against her heart. At that moment he was talking to her mother, and the accent alone with which he pronounced the most innocent words caused Rosalie pain. But Madam Offarel, who for some seconds had seemed very much preoccupied, got up quickly.

“I can hear Cinderella scratching,” she said; “the pet wants to go out.”

She went back into the dining-room to open the door for her favourite cat, delighted without doubt to leave the young people together, for she stayed some time caressing her other pets. During this time she was saying to herself, “Since he has come at once he still remains faithful to her; but when will he declare himself? Poor girl! He will not find in these gilded drawing-rooms a pearl like her. She is gentle, honourable, pretty and true. Now he has become a good match. Therefore there is no obstacle in the way, for we were favourably disposed towards him before. She will not have to slave, as I did for Offarel. What

a pity she is using her little hands to mend this linen." And as she arranged the handkerchiefs, which had already been inspected, she continued her thoughts. "Her little dowry! What a surprise!" By strenuous economy she had scraped together, from her husband's modest allowance, about fifteen thousand francs, which she had invested without his knowledge. She smiled to herself and strained her ears with some anxiety. "What are they talking about?" She knew that her daughter loved René, but she was not aware of the secret understanding which united the young people. With what astonishment would she not have been filled if she had suspected that Rosalie had already often exchanged with her lover furtive and timid kisses, and that directly her mother had gone into the other room she had taken his hand and said, putting her whole heart into her gracious reproach: "How could you go yesterday evening without wishing me good-bye?"

"I was hustled away by Claude," René said, blushing and pressing the girl's fingers, but she was not deceived by his excuse or his pretended caress, for she freed her hand. She sadly shook her head, and said, as if opening her mouth was an effort:

"No, you are not as kind as you used to be. How long is it since you wrote any verses for me?"

"Are you like those ignorant folk who think that poetry can be written to order?" the young man replied almost harshly. He had that feeling of irritability which is the most certain sign of love's decline. Sentimental obligation in its worst form appeared to

him in one of its thousand shapes. By an instinct which leads them, on the one part, to look into the depths of their sorrow, on the other to pursue with tenacity their past happiness, women who feel that a man's love for them is waning formulate these insignificant and humble demands which produce upon the man's heart an effect similar to that of a clumsy tug at the bridle of a horse with a sensitive mouth. The lover who comes with the firm intention of being gentle and tender suddenly flies into a passion. Rosalie had displeased him; she realised it as she had done René's harshness, and she was overwhelmed with distress. Since her lover's departure on the previous evening she had been jealous without any grounds for her jealousy and without being willing to admit it, but she was all the same jealous. "Whom will he meet at this affair?" she had asked herself instead of going to sleep. "With whom will he talk?" And now, "Ah, he is already unfaithful to me or he would not speak in that tone." The silence which followed his harsh reply was so painful to her that she said timidly:

"Did the company act well yesterday?"

Why was she hurt at seeing how pleased René was to lay hold upon this question to prevent the conversation drifting into other than commonplace channels? The heart of the woman who really loves—and she loved—finds new susceptibilities at the service of the slightest impressions, and brokenheartedly she heard René answer, "They acted divinely." Then he entered into a dissertation upon the difference there is between the play as viewed from

a distance on the stage and seen at close quarters in a drawing-room.

“ Poor little girl! ” Madam Offarel said to herself when she returned, “ she is so naïve, she does not know how to talk of anything but that cursed play.” Then aloud, so as to take her revenge upon someone because René had not declared himself, she said, “ Well, is not your friend, M. Larcher, a little bit jealous at your success? ”

CHAPTER VI

AN OBSERVER'S LOGIC

THOUGH René had experienced a painful depression when he called upon the Offarels, when he left there he felt still worse. His steps led him unwittingly to that part of the Faubourg Saint Germain where in his youth he loved to walk and commune with his thoughts. His mind turned once more to the Countess Komof's party; Rosalie and his remorse were both forgotten. He suddenly recollected that Madam Moraines was at home that day. Should he call? But it occurred to him that he did not know her address. Still, Claude knew it, and all he had to do was to ask him. When the idea of visiting his friend entered his head he felt in any case it was impossible not to put that part of the plan into execution. He hastily turned his steps in the direction of the Rue de Varenne.

He reached the door of the strange house where Larcher had his residence. He lived in a vast mansion built in the days of Louis XIV., the property of the Marquis de Saint-Euverte, who had retired six years previously to his country seat in Poitou, though before his departure two flats were let to persons of quiet occupations. In this way Claude found himself installed in a wing of the mournful and silent building.

The very strangeness of the house was its greatest charm in the author's eyes, while he too was able to enjoy absolute freedom, for his gifts of theatre tickets and his reputation had quite won the porter's heart. The latter being absent from his lodge when René arrived, the visitor made his way to his friend's rooms. The servant who answered the bell, Ferdinand by name, combined the duties of waiting upon Claude and looking after the mansion, only going out once a month. The porter performed the author's errands for him, while his wife did the cooking. This little circle lived under the fascination of Claude, who possessed to a remarkable extent the gift of attaching his inferiors to himself by a curious comprehension of characters and his childish good-nature. When Ferdinand saw the visitor he could not conceal a look of great concern.

“ I shall get into trouble, sir, for letting you in.”

“ Is Claude at work? ” René asked, smiling at the poor fellow's naïve fright. Ferdinand found himself face to face with a visitor whom his master obviously had not expected.

“ No,” the servant replied, almost in a whisper, “ but Mademoiselle Colette is there.”

“ Ask him if he will see me for a minute,” said the poet, curious to know what attitude the two lovers adopted to one another after the previous evening's scene, and he added, “ I will take entire responsibility,” to dispel the servant's hesitation.

“ You can go up, sir,” was the message with which the latter returned, and he preceded the visitor through the ante-room, then up a little side staircase

which led to the three rooms Claude generally occupied. The appearance of the staircase and two of the three rooms was extraordinary, because of the misuse of the materials and tapestry. Artificial light, tempered by coloured panes of glass, hardly illuminated on this February afternoon the morocco chairs of the smoking-room and vast drawing-room, the walls of which were hidden by books. The writer's favourite spot was a recess at the back, hung with dark stuff, from which stood out the canvases and water-colours of the most modern painters of the period; those the extreme taste of the occupant preferred. There were two theatre dressing-rooms by Forain, a dancer by Degas, a country scene by Raffaelli, a seascape by Monet, four water-colours by Félicien Rops, and upon a draped pedestal a bust of Claude Larcher himself by Rodin, a marvellous likeness, in which the great sculptor had reproduced with wonderful fidelity the psychology of his subject: his moral inquietude and licentiousness, his daring mind and feeble will, his native idealism and corruption, which had been acquired almost systematically. A low bookcase, a bureau in a corner, three arm-chairs of the Venetian pattern, with negroes to support their arms, and a large divan of green leather completed the furniture of this recess, which at the moment was full of the smoke of Colette's Russian cigarette. The young woman was reclining upon the divan, with her blonde hair half down, in a slightly masculine costume, with a stiff collar and an open jacket. Beneath her English cloth skirt her shapely ankles, rather long feet, black silk stockings and patent leather shoes were visible. Her hollow cheeks were

pale, with the pearly pallor which the abuse of making-up, long nights, and the fatigues of an exacting existence give to many theatrical ladies. Claude was at her feet, upon the same divan, very pale himself, and his discomposed face, like the untidy cushions, and Colette's appearance was a sufficient indication that there had taken place between the two lovers one of those scenes of animal reconciliation in which founder with all the man's spite all his dignity.

"Ah! little Vincy," Colette said as she offered the visitor her hand, "you have come just in time to save me from a thrashing. If you only knew how cruel Claude is to me! Now, Claude," she added, holding up a threatening finger to her lover, "contradict me if you dare, if you dare, my love." With a graceful gesture, which revealed the flexibility of her figure—she said herself that she hardly ever wore corsets—the charming girl raised herself, placed her blonde head upon Claude's shoulder, and put between his lips the cigarette she was smoking. The unhappy man cast at his young friend a glance of supplication and shame, then he turned his gaze upon Colette, and tears stood in his eyes. The latter became still more coquettish, and leant her throat against her lover. A silence fell upon the three. The fire crackled softly, and a ray of sunlight, coming through the windows, made a red stripe tremble upon the actress's face. He knew from experience the strange cynicism of their ways, but he also recalled Claude's terrible departure on the previous evening, and Colette's cruel words. He was stupefied at witnessing once more the author's

degrading weakness and the woman's inconsistency. He felt, too, in the warm atmosphere of this room, filled with the scent the actress used, and in the presence of this almost shameless pair, an impression of sensuality which was too familiar to him. Very often the coming and going of this depraved woman, whose depravity was that of the greatest of courtesans, had given him the notion of a physical love, very different to that he had known. In her dressing-room, when she was before her mirror, making up with her hare's foot and rouge, with her bare shoulders and breast, and her well-shaped legs in their red silk stockings, she appeared to him like a temptress capable of bestowing kisses unique in their savour, and René then envied Claude as much as he pitied him. This feeling gave place to the disgust which the actress's moral depravity inspired in the poet, and to the fervent scruples of friendship which young fellows profess and practise. It would have horrified René to covet even for a moment his protector's mistress. Perhaps the intuition of this delicacy was not altogether unconnected with Colette's attitude. She amused herself simply out of perversity, by displaying her beauty before his senses, as a flower whose perfume the nostrils must inhale even when the hands are not outstretched to pluck it. By a strange association of desires the picture of Madam Moraines came into his mind again, adorned with all the previous evening's seductiveness in which she had enveloped him by the aid of the perfume of her toilet. He this time felt two things: one, that it would be impossible not to call upon this woman that very day; the second, that he

would never have the strength to pronounce her name and ask for her address in the presence of the actress with the lascivious eyes who was now kissing Claude full on the lips.

"Go away," the latter said, repulsing her. "I love you and you know it. Why do you make me suffer? Ask René in what state he saw me yesterday. Tell her, Vincy, that she ought not to play with my heart. Bah!" he went on, as he passed his hand over his eyes. "What does it matter? Whatever you did, wherever you had been, I should still fall down upon my knees and adore you."

"Those are the madrigals he composes every day," Colette cried, laughing like a child and lying back upon the cushions. "Ah, well, René, speak to him too from me. Tell him how angry I was with him last evening because he left without wishing me good-bye. He did not write to me, and I got over my anger. Yes, I was the first to come round. Ah! if I did not love you, should I not let you go, savage?" and she took the author by the hair. The corners of her mouth drooped, her teeth clenched, her face expressed what she really felt for Claude, cruel sensuality, that feeling which impels a woman to make a martyr of the man whose caresses she cannot shun. There have been in history queens who loved in this fashion and cut off the heads of the lovers who exercised upon them the strange power of appealing at the same time to their desire and to their hate. René answered gently:

"It is quite true that I was anxious about him last evening, and that you were very cruel."

"The old story!" Colette retorted with her most

evil laugh. "I have already told you that you swallow anything. I came back even after he threatened to kill me, and I arrived here just as I was, in my stage costume, without even removing the rouge. I found him correcting proofs."

"But it is the profession," Claude replied; "you play perfectly a gay part with grief in your heart."

• "What does that prove?" she said bitterly. "That we are two comedians; only I accept you as you are, and you do not."

While she went on teasing Claude with that fierce lucidity which a spiteful mistress has at her command against the man whose heart she has won, René had espied upon the bureau one of those Society directories which contain the address of every person in any way connected either closely or distantly with Society. He picked it up and turned over the pages, saying, with the embarrassment of his little deception in his look and voice:

"What! your name is not in it, Claude?"

"To be sure," Colette replied. "I sternly forbade it. He is too fond of those smart people as it is."

"I thought you liked those gentlemen's conversation well enough," Claude retorted.

"What a fine allusion!" she replied, with a shrug of her pretty shoulders; "but it is their business to be smart. They know how to dress, play tennis, ride and talk sport; and as for you, you will never be anything but a fop with a wise man's head. Ah! If I could see you now as you were eight years ago, when I left the Conservatoire and you were introduced to me. It was in a restaurant at the corner of the Rue

des Saint-Père. I was lunching with my mother and Farquet, my master. You looked so nice in your corner, as if you had just emerged from a cell and opened your big eyes upon life. That was the reason I took a fancy to you. Shall we see you at the theatre this evening?" she added as René got up and put down the book. He had found in it what he was looking for—Madam Moraines' address. She lived in the Rue Murillo near Monceau Park.

"No? Then to-morrow, and particularly try not to become like that man, a frequenter of evening parties. How good they are, your fashionable women! There were three of them who looked lovingly at me last night. But look at his face. No sooner are you gone than he will get angry again. You are not going to become jealous of the women too, are you?" she added, lighting another cigarette. "Good-bye, René."

"She is like that in your presence," Claude said as he let his friend out a few minutes later, "but if you knew how nice, good and tender she can be when we are alone."

"But Salvaney?" the young man heedlessly asked.

"Well," Claude said, turning pale, "she went to his place to see the pictures, that was all. With women everything is possible, even goodness," he added, pressing René's fingers with a hand which trembled slightly. "I always believe her when she speaks in a certain tone."

CHAPTER VII

THE PROFILE OF A MADONNA

"CAN a man of intelligence and heart descend to that level?" Rene said to himself after he had left his unhappy friend; and again, thinking of Colette's delicate features, he went on, "She is very pretty. If it were only possible to blend the beauty of soul of a child like Rosalie with her graceful gestures, elegance and attractiveness." But this fusion of the two beauties, that of the soul, without which woman is more bitter than death to the heart of the Christian, that of the eyes, and in fact the whole of her adornment, without which her Pagan charm vanishes, is not this supreme and complete harmony found in creatures to whom the hazard of birth and fortune have made an environment of natural aristocracy, and who have enough cleverness in them to be equal to their environment? Was not Madam Moraines like that? Such at least had been the poet's first impression, and he delighted in a revival of that impression by his reasoning. Yes, that delightful woman, whose phantom passed across his recollection like a caress, possessed this double charm: a grace of gesture and toilette superior to that of the actress; a grace of heart equal to Rosalie's. Her fine manners, her soft voice, the ideality of her conversation revealed it at first sight. René walked

amid such thoughts as these, a victim of a kind of mirage which made him impervious to surrounding sensations. He awakened from his sleep-walking on leaving the Invalides Bridge and entering the Avenue d'Antin. His feet had automatically led him the nearest way to the residence of the Suzanne whose image had that day been mixed up in all his reveries. He smiled at the idea that he had formerly made real pilgrimages to this Rue Murillo when Gustave Flaubert lived there. René admired the author of *La Tentation* so much that the contemplation of the house of that powerful and extraordinary writer had been one of the emotions of his literary youth. How far removed was he now from that period, and how delightful, if it could have been foreseen, that this same street should be the one he should traverse on his way to visit the woman who was so much like the object of his dreams! Should he go to-day? The question occurred to him again with more precision as the time advanced. One more round of the clock face by the minute hand, then it would be five o'clock and he could see her. He could! The reality of this possibility imposed itself so quickly upon his thoughts that all timidity's objections arose at once. "No," he said to himself, "I will not go. She would be surprised to see me so quickly. She bade me come because she knew the others had invited me. She did not desire to appear less gracious than them." What had seemed to him, in the case of the others, a commonplace, became a delicate attention when it concerned the woman he began to love—without knowing it himself. In thus discovering one more motive for distinguishing

her from all those he had met on the previous evening, he found his opposition to his desire to see her again weakening. Almost instinctively he called a cab and returned to the Rue Cœtlogon to dress. His sister had gone out, Françoise was occupied with his dinner. As he lavished the most exquisite care upon the tiniest details of his attire, he still had not the courage to distinctly say to himself, "I will go to the Rue Murillo," and now it was no longer from his timidity that he demanded strength against his ever-increasing desire. The objects in the room recalled Rosalie to his mind. With the sentimental probity natural in such a youthful heart he set himself to picture his duty to the poor child. "If she were to receive without my knowledge a man who pleased her as much as Madam Moraines does me, what should I think?" But the voice of the tempter went on, "You are an artist, you need new sensations and worldly experience. Are you going to Madam Moraines to make love to her?" At that moment, in order to sprinkle a couple of drops upon his handkerchief, he opened a bottle of white rose which was upon his dressing-table. The penetrating aroma sent a tremor through his veins. Since he had loved Rosalie he had been faithful to her. The reserve of his youth was moved by this scent, through which he saw once more all that was ideal in the woman in regard to whom he was endeavouring to provide himself with intellectual motives for his admiration. Her golden hair, her red lips and white teeth, her throat, shoulders and bare arms, upon which a golden down seemed to shimmer—what could the idea of loyalty to Rosalie do against these visions?

It was five o'clock. René went out, jumped into a cab and said, "Rue Murillo." All the way he closed his eyes, so painful to him was the sensation of expectancy. Mingled in it was a feeling of shame at his own weakness, a fear of the unknown, profound joy at the thought he was about to see those delicate features, and last of all a little of that mad hope, the more intoxicating as it is the more indeterminate, which urges men of that age along fresh paths simply because they are new. The impression of continuance so necessary to the finished man who has judged life and knows it to be too short is odious to the very young. They are changing, and consequently treacherous at the age of twenty-five, by the most naïve of the instincts of their being. This one, who was immeasurably superior to many others, had already irreparably deceived in thought the young girl by whom he knew he was loved, when his cab dropped him at the door of the Suzanne whom he had met for an hour the previous evening. He would have trampled upon Rosalie's heart rather than not cross this threshold now. Besides, if the recollection of her came into his mind at the last he said to himself, "She will not know," those words which are always used before acts of deception of this nature.

The house in which Madam Moraines lived presented that complicated appearance, thanks to which the modern architects of fashionable neighbourhoods know how to give somewhat the look of a private house to ordinary patchwork buildings divided into flats. It was lofty, with a profusion of stylish windows, and was separated from the street by a courtyard with

an iron railing. The porter's lodge was a sort of Gothic pavilion, situated precisely in the middle of this railing, and when René asked if Madam Moraines was at home he could see in the interior of the lodge a room more cheerful, cleaner and better furnished than the Offarels' drawing-room upon party nights. Had the old soldier, wearing his army medal, who resided in this pavilion, answered the young man's question in the negative he would have almost thanked him so painful had his emotion suddenly become because of its intensity. He heard these words, "Through the courtyard, the door facing you, upon the second floor." He ascended some stone steps, then ascended a wooden staircase hung with a tapestry of delicate tints. The atmosphere of the staircase was warm, like that of a room. Here and there green plants displayed their foliage, which the gas illuminated. Chairs were placed at each bend in the staircase, upon which the young man twice sat down. His limbs trembled. If he had been able up to this time to delude himself as to the sort of interest which attracted him to Madam Moraines he must understand, taking into consideration the state of nervous excitement into which the woman's approach threw him, that this interest had nothing in common with simple curiosity. He acted, however, as if he were in a dream. In this fashion he rang the bell, listened to the servant's approach, and spoke, so that before he could recover his self-possession he was ushered by that fellow into the little drawing-room where was the dangerous person whose bewitching charm had already captivated him, though he knew

nothing of her but her beauty. Alas! That beauty is so often only a delusion, worse than others, when one looks in the woman for something else besides a line, a contour and appearance. René would have in his fancy designed a setting for that rare and noble beauty, though he would not have dreamed of anything better than that in which the young woman appeared to him for the second time. She was sitting in the act of writing, in the light of a lamp veiled by a lace shade. Around the desk climbed a root of ivy, which was planted in a low flower-stand, and which clung with its foliage to a gilt trellis. There was in this little drawing-room the profusion of curios and luxuries necessary to every modern establishment. The inevitable long chair with its cushions, the tiny glass vase filled with Japanese trifles, photographs in their silver frames, three or four pictures, the lacquer boxes and china upon the little table, with its cloth of ancient silk besprinkled with flowers—who does not know this refined scheme of decoration so usual in contemporary Paris that it has become commonplace? But René had never seen Society except in the pages of writers of half a century ago, like Balzac, or of more modern authors who had never entered a drawing-room, and the effect of this room, which harmonised so well in the half light, was to him a revelation of personal delicacy in the woman who had presided over the arrangement. The charm of this moment was all the more irresistible because the madonna of this sanctuary, perfumed with flowers, softly lighted and warmed by a small fire, received him with a smile, and eyes which at once destroyed the puerile anguish

of his timidity. Men to whom Nature has dispensed the inexplicable power of pleasing women, independent of their mental qualities, their hearts, and even of their physical qualities, have in the soul something like moral antennæ to warn them from the first of the impression they produce. The poet, in spite of his absolute ignorance both of Suzanne's character and the ways of her set, realised that he had done right in calling. This evidence soothed his nerves, and he could entirely give himself up to the kindness which emanated for him from this creature, the first of her class he had been permitted to approach. He discovered, simply by looking at her, that she was not the same woman as on the previous evening. She had just returned home; without doubt some inevitable occupation, perhaps the necessity of writing at once, had only allowed her to take off her hat and replace her boots by little patent shoes, for she was still wearing her walking dress, which was quite black, and had a stiff collar like Colette's; her hair was of the same shade as Colette's and simply knotted upon her head. She seemed to the young man in this guise nearer to him, less superhuman, more detached from that impenetrable atmosphere which the great pomp of her toilettes and the ceremony of receptions develops around a fashionable woman. The few points of resemblance to the actress even lent an additional charm to her. They allowed him to measure the distance which separated the two beings, as he listened to Suzanne saying, in the voice which on the previous evening had been her most seductive charm:

" Ah! Monsieur Vincy, how kind it is of you to have come! "

This commonplace formula meant nothing. Madam de Sermoises would have uttered the same words, so would Madam Ethorel and scraggy Madam Hurault. Upon Madam Moraines' lips they became, to the person addressed, the expression of real and profound sympathy, of absolute goodness and divine indulgence. For was not the phrase uttered with infinite grace, and had not a slight gleam of surprise passed into those clear blue eyes and the smile become more seductive still. Even had not René come to the Rue Murillo fully prepared to religiously collect the slightest reasons for admiring Suzanne more, the latter would have carried him away by the way in which her reception of him flattered his vanity. Do not the most famous authors, men *blasé* with the false idolatry of the drawing-room, allow themselves to be captivated by kindness of this sort? The author of *Sigisbée* besides did not see so far as that. He had come, his heart weighed down by the fear of displeasing, and he pleased. He had experienced since the morning a passionate desire to meet Suzanne again; he visited her, and she was pleased to see him. She let fall from those same lips, which moved so prettily at every word, this second phrase, with a slight closing of the eyes: " If you have accepted all the invitations your success of yesterday brought you, you must have had a busy day."

" But, madam, you are the only one I have called upon," he replied instinctively. He had hardly uttered the words before he felt himself blushing. The

significance of the phrase was so clear, the sentiment it betrayed so sincere, that he was quite out of countenance, like a child the spontaneity of whose nature has led into saying something he wished to conceal. Had he not made use of familiarity which would offend this exquisite creature, this woman so delicate that no tone would escape her, so sensible that the slightest lack of tact would certainly wound her? With her rosy blonde complexion, her bright silky hair, her pure blue eyes and the grace of her figure, she appeared to him in the few seconds which followed his exclamation, like a sort of Titania in whose presence he was an obscure, dull-witted Bottom. He saw that he was as mentally clumsy by the side of her as he would have been physically clumsy, if he had tried to reproduce the grace of one of her gestures, of the one, for instance, with which at that precise moment she closed her tapestry blotting-pad, and with her beautiful hands set in order all the small objects which covered the writing-table. An imperceptible smile hovered about her lips while the young man uttered his naïve exclamation. But how was he to see the smile when he dropped his eyes at the very moment? How had he guessed that his reply could not displease, since it was just the one his questioner expected and had provoked? René had just obtained another proof that Madam Moraines was as good and as sweet as she was pretty; instead of taking offence and retiring within herself she went to meet the fresh wave of timidity which he feared in her reply to his foolish phrase:

“Ah, well, sir, I to some extent deserve this pre-

ference which would make me the object of much jealousy if it were known, for no one admires your great talent as much as I do. There is in your verse such a real and fine sensibility. You see, we women rarely judge with our minds, it is our hearts which criticise for us. It is so rare for the authors of to-day not to wound us in one way or another. What is the result? We remain faithful to the old ideal. Yes, I know it is scarcely the fashion of to-day. It is almost ridiculed. But we brave the ridicule. Besides, I inherit my tastes from my dear father. It was always his most cherished wish to work for the uplifting of literature in our unhappy country. I thought of him as I listened to your lines. He would have enjoyed them so."

She stopped as if to discard her mournful memories. After the tone in which she had pronounced her father's name it would have needed a monster of incredulity not to believe that an incurable wound bled in her each time she thought of the famous minister. Her words astonished René not a little. He recalled Sainte Beuve's cruel article in his old age against a bill concerning the publishing trade elaborated by Bois-Dauffin, and the memory of this statesman was to him that of one of literature's sworn enemies, thousands of whom there are in politics. He besides professed a profound horror for the conventional idealism to which Madam Moraines had just alluded. His two favourite authors were, in poetry, Theophile Gautier, because of the square form of his strophes, and the precision of his metaphors; in prose, Flaubert, because of the metallic clearness of his style and the

voluntary impersonality of his work. But the fact that Suzanne saw in her father an enlightened protector of literature pleased him, proving, as it did, her integrity of heart. It pleased him, too, to think that she caressed in her mind the chimera of an art almost finical in its delicacy. Such a way of understanding beauty supposes, when it is sincere, real inner purity. When it is sincere? René despised himself for asking such a question in the presence of this angel who seemed hardly to impose any weight upon her arm-chair, and whose eyes seemed to be far away in dreamland. He stammered, rather than replied, a phrase as vague as that in which Madam Moraines had clad her thoughts, talking of the exquisite sentiment of women in literature, he, the frantic admirer not only of Gautier but of Baudelaire! Was she clever enough to realise by his tone that she would make a false move if she continued in that strain? Or did the profound ignorance in which, like so many women of the world, she let herself live, only reading the newspapers and a few bad novels in the train, make her incapable of carrying on a conversation of this character and bringing names to the support of her ideas? Still, she did not linger upon the dangerous subject, and passed on from the question of the ideal in Art to that more feminine problem, the ideal in Love. She knew how to assume as she pronounced the word "love," in which so many contradictory things are blended, so discreet a look that René experienced the delightful emotion of an exchanged confidence. That was a matter set apart and one upon which this woman, evidently with a soul

above all gallantry, ought to keep silent when she was not in full sympathy.

"What pleases me so in *Sigisbée*," she said in her fine musical voice, "is the faith in love which is revealed in it, and the horror of coquetry, of lies, of all the villainy which dishonours the most divine of the sentiments of the human soul. Ah! believe me," she added, resting her forehead upon her hands in a gesture of profound reflection, at the same time casting upon the young man so serious a glance that she seemed to put all her thoughts into it; "believe me, the day you doubt love you will cease to be a poet. But there is a God who watches over genius," she went on with a sort of contained exaltation. "This God will not allow the magnificent gifts He has lavished upon you to be sterilised by scepticism. For you are religious, I am sure, and a good Catholic?"

"I have been," he replied.

"And now?" she said, with an expression almost of suffering upon her face.

"I have many days of doubt," he simply replied. She was silent and began to look at him without speaking, with an almost stunned admiration, this woman who found in herself amid the whirl of a life of fashion the means of breathing in an atmosphere of such noble and lofty ideas. He did not tell himself that there was something degrading, something like the worst sentimental acting, in displaying thus to an unknown—what more was he to her?—the inmost and the most living convictions of the heart. He who knew, however, in his uncle, Father Taconet, an accomplished example of the true Christian soul, was not astonished

that. Madam Moraines had mingled together, in the same phrase, two things so completely foreign to one another: the belief in God and the gift of writing plays in verse. He knew nothing but that to hear her voice speak to him again, to surprise in her blue eyes the expression of profound faith, to watch her sensuous lips move, to feel this woman's presence near him for a time, for ever, he would have at that moment faced the most terrible danger. Amid the silence, the singing of the kettle, which the servant had brought immediately after showing René in, became noticeable. Suzanne passed across her eyes a hand, the fingers of which gleamed; she assumed a smile which seemed to ask pardon for herself, poor ignorant creature, for having dared to approach serious problems in the presence of a clever man like him. Then she went on, with the grace women know how to impart to their childish changes of front when they offer you a sandwich after talking about the immortality of the soul:

"But you have not come here to listen to a sermon and I am forgetting that I am only a woman of the world. Will you have a cup of tea? Come and help me to get it ready."

She got up. Her step was so light, so supple, and René was in such a state of complete bewitchment that the tread, which hardly touched the ground, seemed to him something unique, as if the woman's slightest gestures had continued the delicacy of the conversation. He got up too, and took a seat near the tiny tea-table. He watched her as her beautiful hands moved hither and thither among the fragile porcelain of the tray. She continued to talk, but this

time of all sorts of the tiny details of life, pouring out the black tea into the cup, and telling him where she procured it, then the boiling water, and questioning him as to the way he prepared his coffee when he wanted to work. She at last sat down by his side, after placing the dainties within reach of both. She had improvised quite a little feast, in that petting way in which women so excel. She knew quite well that the fiercest had a childish need of being spoiled, or surrounded by little attentions, and that with this coin of false affection they could captivate the heart so quickly. Suzanne then questioned the poet. She made him recount his impressions of the first performance of *Sigisbée*. She finished her work of seduction by constraining him to talk of himself. All René's shyness had disappeared, for he seemed as if he had known the woman for days and days, so deeply did this visit graven her in his heart every moment. He therefore experienced the sensation of awakening from a divine dream when the door opened to admit a fresh arrival.

"Ah, what a bore!" Suzanne said almost in an undertone. How sweet this exclamation sounded, accompanied as it was by a sad smile and coquettish shrug of the shoulders! He got up to say good-bye, but not before Madam Moraines had introduced him to the unexpected visitor.

"Baron Desforges," she said, "Monsieur Vincy."

The author had just time to glance at a man of medium height, well dressed in a dark morning suit. The newcomer looked just as near forty-five as fifty-five,—really, he was fifty-six—so inscrutable was his face.

His moustache was still fair; his hair had become quite grey, and indicated by its colour that the Baron did not display his vanity by concealing his age, and by its thickness that he had succeeded in avoiding the universal Parisian malady of baldness. His face was just a trifle too red to suit the general elegance of his person. His clear eyes probed René with that glance of acute indifference affected by professional diplomats, which seems to say to the man being scrutinised, "If I cared to make your acquaintance I should do so. I do not condescend." Was it the sensation of this glance? Was it simply the vexation of seeing an exquisite hour interrupted? The poet at once felt a profound antipathy for the Baron, who had, on hearing his name, bowed without uttering a word to show whether he knew the writer by name or not. But what did it matter to the latter since Madam Moraines had found the opportunity to say, as she wished him good-bye with a smile and a handshake:

"Thank you for your kind visit." I have been so pleased to see you."

Pleased! What term should he use, the man who, in a state of indeterminate intoxication verging on tears, felt, as he descended the staircase of the house in which this delightful woman lived, that before that day and hour he had never loved?

CHAPTER VIII

THE MADONNA'S OTHER PROFILE

"THAT is Madam Komof's little poet," Suzanne said as soon as the door had closed behind the young man. The way in which she answered in advance a question she had read upon the newcomer's face marked the position the latter occupied in the family circle. With the gay, girlish smile she so well knew how to assume, one of those smiles in which even the most suspicious of men will always believe, for they have seen their sisters smile in the same way, she went on:

"It is true, you annoyed the Countess yesterday. I was pretty, very pretty. I should have done you credit. I had my hair arranged in the way you like. I hoped I should see you after all. I was introduced to that young man, who is the author of the play. The poor fellow came to leave his card. He did not know my times and came up. Ah! you have done me a signal service in getting rid of him. He dared not go."

"You see I was quite right in disapproving of that affair," the Baron said, "and there is a fresh man of letters in Society. He called upon you. He will do the same with some of your friends. He will come again. He will receive invitations. People will talk in his presence, as they would before you or me, without reflecting that on leaving your house he will

go out of sheer vanity and supply some news agency with the scandal he may have picked up in this way. Then society women will be astonished at finding themselves portrayed to the life in a scandalous story or novel! Authors in the drawing-room, that is one of the most stupid manias of Society of the day. We do them injury by taking up their time, while they harm us by scandalising us. I was told the other day the saying of the daughter of one of that gentleman's colleagues who helps her father in his literary work: 'We never go into Society without obtaining a couple of pages of useful copy.' I am at a loss to understand this taste for talking before phonographs—and stupid or lying ones at that."

"Ah!" Suzanne said as she took the Baron's hand between her own and gazed at him with eyes which displayed an admiration too great not to be sincere. "How fortunate I am to have met you so that you may direct my life! What insight you have, what cleverness!"

"A little tact," Desforges went on, shaking his head the while, "prevents the commission of three-quarters of the bad actions which are only foolishness. All my knowledge of life is used in an endeavour to try and enjoy the remainder of it. Do you know, Suzanne, that in six days I shall be fifty-six?"

She shook her pretty blonde head, and again approached him, for as he spoke he had taken a few steps across the room. With a gesture which could neither have been described as lascivious nor yet pure, for a big girl would in the same way have begged a kiss from her father, she put under the Baron's lips first of all one

of her eyes, and then the corner of her beautiful mouth with its dimple.

"Come," she said, "will you have some tea? When you boast of your age it is a bad sign. You have been bored at the House, or in one of the Committees."

As she said this she walked towards the little table where the two dirty cups were still standing. Did she remember the Madonna *rôle* she had played there a quarter of an hour before, and the handsome young man upon whom she had lavished the most delicate grace of her attitudes? If the thought entered her mind did she not feel a little shame, a little regret at least that the poet had gone, or even a malicious impression, like those bold *comédiennes* feel in their moments of confidential hypocrisy? She prepared the tea with the same care she had taken just previously. The Baron quite naturally dropped into the arm-chair René had vacated. Suzanne took the same chair she had occupied near the young man, and listened to Desforges as he talked. This agreeable man had the failing of at times dogmatising. He knew life, that was his great and just claim. He simply put rather too high a value upon it.

"Quite true, the sitting at the Palais Bourbon was cruel," he said. "I went to hear that fine fellow, De Sauve, attack the Ministry. He still believes in speeches, in oratorical triumphs in Parliament. Since I refused the ministerial appointment I am a sceptic, a carper, a pessimist. My name looks well upon the Electoral lists, because my grandfather held office under the great Emperor, and I myself was a Councillor of State under the other. The name looks well

at the end of a proclamation. But as for listening to me, that is another matter. They are afraid of me! At the club, when I go there about five, there are half a dozen of my young and old friends who are in favour of the restoration of the monarchy, watching the women pass, in the summer upon the terrace, or in the winter in the drawing-room between the *bazique* players. I enter. If you could only see their faces, and how quickly they change their conversation. Tact again. I should have gone up to them and told them a few home truths to-day, to relieve my feelings, only I preferred to go to the Rue de la Paix and get your earrings, which were to be ready."

He took out of his pocket a little jewel-case, inside which was no mark which could indicate the jeweller's name, and offered it wide open to the young woman, making sparkle the diamonds, two stones of the rarest beauty, at which she, too, gazed with a gleam in her eyes. The case passed from the Baron's hand into hers, and after a moment's contemplation she shut up the little box and placed it with other things upon a corner cupboard at her side. The gesture alone sufficed to prove how used she was to such presents. Then she turned to Desforges her pretty face rosy with pleasure.

"How good you are!" she said.

"Do not thank me. It is egoism again," he said, visibly pleased at the success his ear-rings had obtained with Suzanne. "It is I who am beholden to you for your willingness to wear these poor stones. I love to see you beautiful. Ah!" he went on, "I forgot to

tell you, the famous port, half of which I am going to let you have, has arrived, and by a strange coincidence the pretty Watteau you liked. We can have it for a mere song."

"To-morrow, in the Rue du Mont Thabor, you will not prevent me from thanking you," she replied with a glance. "At four o'clock, will you?" She dropped her eyes. If, gifted with the power of second sight, poor René, who at that very moment was returning home intoxicated with his infatuation, had seen her through space, without hearing anything of the conversation, he would have certainly discovered upon her face an expression of the most divine shame. Without doubt to the Baron the downcast eyes and the previous look represented memories of a less pure character, for his eyes lit up, the blood flowed to his cheeks. Then, changing the tone of his conversation:

"Whom have you at the Opéra this evening?" he asked.

"Madam Ethorel only."

"Who are the gentlemen?"

"My husband first of all. Ethorel has excused himself. Crucé, of course."

"What that *liaison* must have brought him in in commissions alone!" Desforges exclaimed. "He has just sold a Louis XIV. clock for twenty thousand francs. I would wager he made ten thousand profit."

"What a cur!" Suzanne cried.

"She is so silly," the Baron said, "and then Crucé knows it, and poor Ethorel, if he had not got it, would pay as dearly for the commonest of curios. Every-

thing is for the best in the best of worlds. And then?"

"Little De Brèves and yourself. Good!" she said, stopping her remark to listen. "Someone is coming in; you know I am so well acquainted with my house." Just as to René earlier, she added, looking at the Baron with a coquettish grimace, "Well, what a nuisance!" Then aloud, with her childish laugh, "Ah! it is only my husband. Good-day, Paul."

"What a heart cry," said the man after whom the servant closed the door, a big fellow of haughty bearing, with beautiful frank, wide-open eyes, set in one of those swarthy faces which betoken energy. His features were of that noble regularity so seldom met with in Paris except in early youth. A face of this sort in a man of more than thirty-five indicates the peace of an irreproachable conscience. From the way alone in which Moraines looked at his wife it was easy to see that he had a profound love for her, just as from the way in which he pressed Desforges' hand the most sincere friendship was recognisable. After laughing gaily at Suzanne's expression he added, bowing with pleasing gravity:

"Am I in the way, madam, and shall I withdraw?"

"Will you have some tea?" Suzanne simply replied. "I warn you it must be cold."

"No, thank you," Moraines said as he dropped into one of the arm-chairs and, like a visitor trying to produce an effect, made this remark, "Some husbands are too stupid, and I blush for the class. You know the story of Hacqueville which I heard at the club?" and with obvious joy, "No? Ah, well! he opened

by accident this morning a letter addressed to his wife, which left no doubt as to the lady's virtue."

"Poor Mainterne," cried Suzanne, "he loved Lucie so dearly."

"The beauty of it," Moraines went on with the triumphant accent of the storyteller who is about to astonish his audience, "is that the letter was not from Mainterne, it was from Laverdin! Lucie had two entanglements. Guess to whom Hacqueville is going to take the letter and ask advice?"

"To Mainterne," said the Baron.

"Ah! Desforbes, you know the story?"

"No," the other man replied, "but it was too obvious. What did Mainterne say?"

"He is tremendously indignant. Lucie has gone home to her mother. There is talk of a duel between Hacqueville and Laverdin, in which Hacqueville insists upon Mainterne seconding him. There is a stupid husband for you, if you like! He has not a friend to warn him."

"He will find one," the Baron said as he rose.

"Never write is the moral of your story."

"Don't you dine with us, Frederick?" Moraines asked.

"I am engaged," Desforbes said, "but we shall meet at the theatre. Madam Moraines has been good enough to keep me a place."

"In your own box," Paul went on. The Baron, who had been a widower for about ten years, and who retained his box at the Opéra, sub-let it for a week to two of his dear friends. Only the rent was never paid. The husband no more suspected this device of his

wife's than he guessed the impossibility of maintaining his establishment in the style it was kept up upon the fifty thousand francs a year they had to spend. The *débris* of the fortune of the old Minister of the Empire, who had saved^a hardly anything during the fifteen years he filled his high post, represented one half of this yearly revenue. The rest was Moraines' salary as the secretary in an Assurance Company, a post which Desforges had procured for him. In spite of Suzanne's observations Paul had not lost the deplorable habit of going into ecstasies over the way in which his partner managed their income—a very small one for the set in which they moved. He had remained, thanks to his naïve simplicity, the sort of man who said to his friends when growling about the expense of living, "If you had a manager like me! She has a servant, a fairy who makes dresses like the great firms! And an art for discovering curios!" "You make me look ridiculous," Suzanne said to him, but he loved her too well not to sing her praises, and again, as soon as Desforges had gone, his first movement was to come to her, to take her two hands, and say:

"How nice it is to have you to myself for a little while. Kiss me, Suzanne."

She offered herself to him in the same way she had done to Desforges; her eye, half-closed, first, and then the corner of her mouth.

"When I hear ugly stories like that," he went on, "I get a chill at my heart, and then I get hot, when I think I have had the good fortune to marry a wife like you. My Suzanne, I adore you!"

"Now you are going to scold me," she said as she escaped from the embrace by which he tried to pull her to him. "This reasonable woman, of whom you are so proud, has done foolish things. Yes," she went on, pointing to the case Desforges had brought, "those diamonds I spoke to you about, I have not been able to refrain, I have bought them."

"But as it was out of your own savings," Paul replied. "Ah! what beautiful stones! Would you like me not to scold? Let me put them on."

"You will never manage it," she replied, as she proffered to her husband one of her tiny ears, adorned with a simple red pearl, which he quickly unscrewed. The other ear and the other pearl had their turn. He displayed similar dexterity in fixing the diamond earrings. He touched her with a man's strong fingers which had become as gentle as a young girl's in the service of the well-beloved. She picked up from the table, in order to see herself, a small ancient hand-mirror with a carved silver handle, another present from Desforges, and smiled. She was so pretty now that Paul drew her to him and kissed her lovingly, trying to obtain possession of her lips. As a rule she did not refuse him. Did she find, in the complications of her nature, the means of keeping a sort of physical sympathy for this fine, honourable fellow whom she deceived in such cruel fashion? What thought came to her to suddenly make his kiss unbearable? She repulsed her husband almost sharply, saying to him:

"Come, leave me alone;" and in order to correct the hardness of her tone she added, "Between old

married folk it is ridiculous; good-bye, I have hardly time to dress."

She went into her bedroom and then into her dressing-room. That was the room of them all, which showed most distinctly the profound materialism at the root of her nature. Her maid, Céline, a big dark girl with inscrutable eyes, began to undress her, in this warm apartment, which was as soft and luxurious as that of a royal courtesan, and anyone seeing her at that moment would have realised that she was capable of anything in order to retain around her this atmosphere of superb refinement. Had she, at the sight of the luxury which surrounded her, a thought of the diverse conditions which assured her this favoured existence? She always looked upon her husband and spoke of him to herself as a "noble heart." The stones she had kept in her ears gleamed, and bringing Desforges to her mind she said to herself almost at the same time, "My good friend." These two contradictory impressions were reconciled in this head, the fine hair of which waved beneath her comb, as the two facts were reconciled in life. Women excel in these moral mosaics, which cease to appear monstrous when one has followed their tranquil progress. This Parisienne of thirty was in truth as perfectly corrupt as it is possible to be, but to do her justice it is necessary to add at once that she did not know it, with such contentment had she submitted to the circumstances which had led her hour by hour to this singular degree of unconscious immorality.

Suzanne had married Paul Moraines two years before the war in 1870, without any feeling of repul-

sion for him, but also without enthusiasm. It was a matter of arrangement between the two families; Moraines senior, a senator since the beginning of the Empire, belonged to the same set as Bois-Dauffin the elder; Paul, an auditor at the Council of State, a fine dancer and lady's man, seemed made for her, just as she appeared designed for him. In short, they made for the first two years what is called a "happy couple"; their life consisted of a whirl of balls, suppers, theatre parties, sport and summer excursions, in which one or the other took the greatest pleasure. Paul himself defined the kind of relations which united him to his wife amid the continual round of pleasure. "You are as pretty as a mistress," he told her as he kissed her in the carriage which was driving them home about one in the morning. The 4th of September brought about the downfall of this fairyland. The two families had lived in the same way upon large salaries which were suddenly cut down without the diminution making any difference in their habits. Till his death, which took place in 1873, Bois-Dauffin remained convinced of the very near approach of the restoration of a rule which in his day had been so strong, so well endowed with men, and so popular. The old senator, who outlived his friend only a little while, shared in these Utopian dreams. Paul, to be sure, had resigned his position upon the Council of State. He possessed even more than his father and father-in-law that blind faith in the success of the cause, which remained for history the original trait of the Imperialist party. Suzanne herself, who had no faith in anything, from that year, 1873 onwards, had a very clear vision of the

ruin to which she and her husband were rushing headlong by living upon their capital as they were doing. That was exactly the period when Frédéric Desforges began to pay her assiduous attention. This man, who was not at that time fifty, had remained the most brilliant representative of the generation which had entered the world at about 1850, and which had for its leader the deep and seductive Morny. In Suzanne's eyes he maintained the prestige of her list of fashionable folk. He very quickly acquired that other prestige, an undisputed superiority in the knowledge and management of Parisian society. Left a widower without children after a brief marriage, almost an idler, for his position as deputy only interested him for form's sake, with an income of more than four hundred thousand francs, without taking into account his mansion, Cours-la-Reine, his estate in Anjou, and his country house at Deauville, the old favourite of the famous Duke had the rare courage to grow old, just as his protector had the courage to die. He thought of forming a final *liaison* which would take him to about sixty and procure him a desirable and accommodating mistress, a pleasant retreat, and what he called "somewhere to spend his evenings." He had soon realised Madam Moraines' position, and calculated that she was exactly the woman of whom he had dreamed, being adorably pretty, clever, and with a presentable husband. He set out all these advantages, and bit by bit the crafty Baron, in confessing Suzanne, in proving to her his attachment by the position he obtained for Moraines, in making her accept present after present, in displaying to her the

tact of the man of the world who asks to be tolerated, led her to the point he desired. That came about in slow and insensible fashion, and, once established, this *liaison* became so simple, so mingled with her everyday life, that the culpability of her relations with Desforges almost escaped Suzanne's notice. What wrong was she doing Moraines after all? Was she not his wife and really attached to him? As for the Baron, it was true that he was responsible for a part of her luxury. But what of that? Is the acceptance of presents prohibited? If he paid a large sum for this or that, was there anyone in the world who would be the worse for it? She was his mistress, but there was such an air of regularity about their *liaison* that it seemed almost conjugal. She was so entirely accustomed to this compromise with her conscience that she looked upon herself, if not quite as an honourable woman, at least as a person very superior in virtue to a number of her friends, with whose numerous intrigues she was well acquainted. If her conscience reproached her at all, it was with having, two years after the beginning of her affair with Desforges, deceived that charming man with a very up-to-date clubman, whom she had carried off at the time of the Deauville races from one of her intimate friends. But that person had almost compromised her seriously, and she had so quickly recognised the man's vain egoism that she had been only too pleased to break off the affair at once. She had sworn to restrict herself to the pleasure of two lovers, her manly Paul and the Baron, that gallant epicure. She had since that time been so circumspect that her good name was impregnable, as far as

possible in the envied position her beauty gave her. She had rivals too well up in figures not to know that the Moraines lived up to an income of 80,000 francs a year, "And we knew them when ruin was staring them in the face," added these good folk. "Calumny," the Baron's friends replied in chorus.

The thought of the thousand services that Desforges had rendered them in this way had without doubt crossed Suzanne's mind when sitting at her toilet-table she said to herself, "Good friend!" Why then, while her maid helped her to dress, did the Baron's intelligent and worn features give place to a young face, surrounded by an ideal beard, lit up by eyes of dark blue, in which all the ardour of a virgin and enthusiastic soul was visible? Why, while Céline's skilful hands laced her white satin corset, did she hear an inner voice murmuring like music the four syllables of that name—"René Vincy. To what secret temptation did she reply with the words, "Do not think of it." She had seen the young man twice. A woman like her, the friend, almost the pupil, of the Parisian Desforges, the most positive of women of the world, who had sold herself in order to have her beauty always surrounded by the most exquisite luxury, could such a woman be caught by the eyes and words of a stray poet she had met the previous night and forgotten to-day? She said to herself, "Do not think of it," and she thought again. What a strange thing it was that, since the previous evening, she could not get rid of the idea that it would be very charming to be loved by him. If the expression, "love at first sight," had been used to her, she would have shrugged with

infinite disdain the white shoulders upon which, after putting on her white dress for the Opéra, she was now arranging the rows of pearls of her necklace; and yet, what other expression could define the rapid and burning passage of emotion which the sight of the young man had inflicted upon her during the party at the Countess's, an emotion which continued with greater strength? Suzanne, between her husband the good fellow, and Desforges, her dear friend, had been bored for a few months without knowing it. The life of fashion, the object of all her sacrifices, had become flat and insipid to her. She called it being too happy. "I want a little sorrow," she said humorously. The fact is she felt that inner meanness produced by continuous gratification, that physical and moral lassitude which is to be found in certain women, whom one is suddenly astounded to see disorganise a life up to then screened with infinite art. They have need of feeling differently, and of love. They commit follies, from the day they meet the man who can move their soul *blasé* with vain joys, the man who may be called in slang "their type." To Madam Moraines, who was about thirty, saturated as she was with the most refined happiness, without any ambition to realise and without the slightest illusion as to the men she met in Society, the appearance of a person as fresh as René, and so little like the usual drawing-room dummies, could and did become a sort of event. Curiosity had urged her the previous evening to sit at the supper-table near him. A woman's instinct made her at the onset take in his eyes the part she thought would fascinate him most. She had been delighted

by their conversation; then returning home she had slept upon the "it is impossible" which serves as the lightning conductor to all thunderbolts of this sort when they fall upon women of the world, who are more closely confined by their drudgery of pleasure than the middle-class by their domestic duties. René had called, and the impression he had made upon her the evening before had been strengthened. Everything about the young man had pleased her, both what she saw and what she divined, his handsome face and noble soul, his bashfulness and timidity. It was quite in vain she repeated to herself the "it is impossible" as she finished her toilette by sticking into her corsage a number of gold pins with diamond heads, so she set about capitulating with the word "impossible." She discussed it, and all sorts of plans formed in her practical woman's head if she desired to entertain the adventure. "The Baron has already seen something." She remembered the violent outburst Desforges had directed against literary men. That tirade had amused her a little while ago. Now it irritated her, and gave her the idea of acting in a way exactly opposite to that which her "excellent friend" desired. She sank into a fit of distraction, which her maid noticed, for she said to the footman in the evening, "There is something the matter with Madam. Is her husband beginning to open his eyes?" And this unreasonable and irresistible fit of distraction pursued her throughout dinner, then in the carriage in which she drove to the theatre, even into the box, up to the moment Madam Ethorcl made the remark:

"Look in the orchestra stalls on the right, near the

passage door. Is not that M. Vincy with his glasses directed upon us? "

"The Countess's poet?" she said unconcernedly. She had mentioned, during the young man's visit, her evening at the Opéra. She remembered that now while she looked through her own chased silver glasses—another of the Baron's presents. She saw René timidly turning his eyes in her direction. She felt a slight tremor. Had not Desforges, who was standing at the back of the box, overheard Madam Ethorel's remark? No, surely not, for he was in serious conversation with Crucé.

"He is talking of the table," she told herself as she listened, "he has heard nothing. What are my feelings? "

For the first time for many a long day the music made a chord of emotion vibrate in her. She spent the evening between the involuntary happiness René's presence gave her, and anguish at the thought that he might pay her a visit in the box. Shame at being noticed without doubt paralysed the poet, for he dared not again look in the direction of the box, and when Suzanne descended the staircase she caught no glimpse of his emotional face in the ranks of the crowd on the stairs. No positive difficulty prevented her from giving way to the caprice which had so strongly obsessed her; and she said to herself, as she laid her blonde head upon her lace-edged pillow:

"As long as he does not ask his friend Larcher for information about me."

CHAPTER IX

A COMEDIENNE IN GOOD FAITH

EVERY morning, a little before nine, Paul Moraines went into his wife's room. She had already taken her bath and was attending to little duties of the toilet. Her white, blue-veined feet had free play in her slippers, her fine figure was displayed in a clinging robe fastened by a girdle, and the thick mass of her golden hair hung down upon her beautiful shoulders. The bedroom, mostly occupied by a large bed in the middle, was fresh and perfumed, and to Paul the three-quarters of an hour he spent in this way, taking his morning cup of tea with Suzanne upon a little movable table in the corner of the window, was the pleasantest of the whole day. At ten o'clock he had to be at his office, and he had no time to return home to lunch. He was the sort of man who takes his seat about half-past twelve in a fashionable restaurant, hastily orders the best item on the bill of fare, a half bottle of wine, a cup of coffee, and departs, after spending as little as it is possible to spend at a fashionable restaurant. It was so pleasant to him to rival in this way his wife's economy. But the morning cup of tea was his much-anticipated day's recompense for the six or seven hours' presence his company exacted. "There are days," he told her in his simple and good-natured

fashion, "when I should not see you but for that delightful cup of tea," and he it was who waited upon her; he buttered with a lover's care the toast her fine teeth were to crunch; he was uneasy when he found her, as he did on the morning after she had seen René at the Opera, with tired eyes and pale from an obvious lack of sleep. The whole night she had been tortured by thoughts of the young man, and by the caprice he had given birth to in what remained of her sensibility. As her mind was above all positive and precise—a real business man's mind at the service of a pretty woman's fancies—she had calculated the means of satisfying this passionate caprice. The first condition was to see the young man again and see him often; now that was impossible at her own house. Her husband proved it to her that very morning when he asked, after his first inquiry concerning her health:

"Did you have many callers yesterday?"

"Nobody," she replied; and as her custom was never to tell unnecessary lies she added, "Except Desforges and the young fellow, the author of the comedy which was performed the other evening at the Countess's."

"René Vincy," Moraines cried. "How I regret missing him! I am so fond of his verses! What is he like? Is he presentable?"

"Neither one thing nor the other," Suzanne said. "He is insignificant."

"Did he meet Desforges?"

"Yes, why?"

"I will talk to the Baron about him. He will have

summed him up at a glance. He is such a good judge of men."

"Very well," Suzanne said to herself, when Moraines had gone, after smothering her with kisses, "he has got into the habit of telling the Baron everything." She foresaw that the first person to inform Desforges of René's constant visits to the Rue Murillo, if she attracted the poet there, would be Paul himself. "He is really too stupid," she thought, and she was angry with herself for this absolute confidence in the Baron, which had been chiefly her handiwork. She began to see clearly the first obstacle. The idea pursued her throughout the whole of the morning, which she spent in going over her accounts and receiving the visit of her manicurist, Madam Leroux, a person of ripe age, steeped in devotion, with a hypocritical and discreet manner, who tended the most aristocratic hands and feet in Paris. Usually Suzanne, who rightly considered servants the principal source of all the scandalous anecdotes, talked for a long while to Madam Leroux, partly to humour her, partly to learn from her an infinite quantity of tiny details about the houses this worthy artist honoured with her services. So Madam Leroux did not stint her praises of charming Madam Moraines. "So simple, so good. A woman who really adores her husband." That day none of the manicurist's flattery could coax a word from her fair client. The desire which had taken hold upon the young woman became the more deeply implanted as her vision of the material obstacles became clearer and more inevitable. To make herself loved, she needed time and places where they could

meet. René did not go into Society, and if he had done so it would have made it all the worse. Other women would have been her rivals. Here, in her house in the Rue Murillo, she could very well take possession of his fresh young heart, and Desforgés' vigilance prevented her! For the first time for years she felt herself a prisoner, and she had a movement of anger against the man to whom she owed everything. She dined, as she usually did, quite alone, in the utmost seriousness, full of these ideas. Even with her protector's generous help she did not make her accounts balance perfectly without economy in certain unnoticeable directions such as the table. She had, in her solitude, so melancholy a moment, so complete a perception of her own impotence, that as she got up she gave utterance in low tones to a despairing phrase, "What is the use?"

Yes, what was the use? Her life had a hold upon her. Not only could she not have René at her house as she desired, but that very afternoon, in spite of the new sentiment which had begun to take possession of her heart, had she not an appointment with Desforgés? "What is the use?" she repeated as she dressed herself, putting on, instead of boots, little shoes which could be taken off more quickly; she wore a bodice which fastened in the front instead of corsets, a dress easy to put on, a black hat, and put a double veil into her pocket. She had ordered for two o'clock the carriage with a pair of horses, which she hired for the afternoon and evening by the month. When she got into it she was so weighed down by the impression of her slavery that she could have wept. What were

her feelings when, at the corner of the Rue Murillo, she saw René standing evidently watching her departure? Their eyes met. He bowed to her with a blush, and she herself had to blush in the corner of the carriage, so keen, on emerging from her despondency, was the feeling of pleasure this meeting gave her, and particularly the idea, "So he loves me too!" She, the cunning and calculating creature, fell into one of those taciturn reveries in which women in love anticipate the countless pleasures of the feeling they experience and inspire. If they dared they would surrender their hearts at once, though this would not prevent them from persuading the man who has thus addressed their hearts that they have hesitated, that he must conquer them bit by bit, moment by moment. They are right, for the foolish vanity of the male meets its deserts in the difficulties of this conquest, and few men have good sense enough to understand the divine pleasure of spontaneous, natural and irresistible love. While the poet went away saying to himself, "I am lost, she will never forgive me for this indiscretion," Suzanne was a delighted victim of that inner tremor before which all prudence gives way, and she outlined, passing over her fears of the morning, the scheme of an intrigue, one of those very simple plans which only a woman's profoundly realistic mind can discover. It was necessary to disarm the suspicions of a very clever man quite *au fait* with her nature. The most skilful way was to act exactly the opposite to what this man could and would expect. To hasten matters; lead, in two or three visits, René to make her a declaration; respond and become his mistress before he had time to

make love to her. Desforgés would never suspect her of such an affair; he knew her to be so deliberate, so prudent and adroit. But if René were to despise her and too quickly give way to his feelings? She shook her pretty head as she formulated this objection. That was a matter of tact, a chance for a woman's cleverness to display itself, and on that ground she was sure of herself.

The joy of outlining the plan in her mind, and also the pleasure of deceiving the crafty Desforgés, was so strangely mingled in her, that she saw the time for his rendezvous approach not only without regret, but with a feeling of malicious pleasure. She sent away her carriage, as she always did, making the pretext of walking, and she entered the arcades of the Rue de Rivoli. The house in which the Baron had taken rooms had the peculiarity of a double entrance, a thing so rare in Paris that buildings of the sort are noted and indexed in the world of fashionable intrigue. Frédéric was too well acquainted with the deepest undercurrents of Parisian life not to have avoided with the greatest care the places which were already well known. The house he had discovered, quite by chance, had escaped the investigation of seekers after that kind of refuge, through the sad and mournful character of the front of the house in the Rue de Mont Thabor. He had there furnished a flat consisting of an ante-room and three other rooms, one of which served as a drawing-room, for lunching or dining if necessary, the other a bedroom and the third a dressing-room. The most profound knowledge of what is called pleasure's comfort had superintended the furnish-

ing of these rooms, the hangings and curtains of which stifled all sounds, the skin rugs upon the floor were inviting to bare feet, while the low easy-chairs and lounges suggested long familiar talks and caresses. The infinite detail of the furnishing of these rooms was alone sufficient to denounce the Baron's sensuality. He had this flat looked after by his valet, a reliable man, whose fidelity was guaranteed by a clever combination of pledges. Suzanne had come so many times for years to this sort of flat, she had so often fastened her double veil in the doorway of the Rue de Rivoli, so many times passed the porter's lodge, that she performed almost mechanically these rites which give so much zest to the seekers after emotion. This time, while she was ascending the staircase, she could not refrain from a comparison; she told herself that she would be, in fact, differently affected if she were coming to meet in that isolated retreat René Vincy instead of the Baron! She knew so well what was going to happen, how she would find that Desforges had made the most elaborate preparations for her reception, from the flowers in the vases to the confectionery, and that in a moment she would go into the dressing-room, and return from it with her hair down, her feet bare, in slippers like those of the morning, wearing a lace wrap. But the Baron was so grateful for her presence, though she herself did not always share his pleasure, and had such a charming way of thanking her, he displayed such mental grace and affection in their conversations that he very often had to remind his mistress of the time and say:

"Now, Suzanne, you must dress."

This time, in the state of mind and senses in which she was, it was Suzanne herself who, almost as soon as she entered, said to her lover:

"Frédéric, I must leave you early to-day."

"Why did you not let me know and postpone the appointment?" the Baron asked as he helped her off with her cloak.

"He is really too amiable," the young woman said to herself as she experienced a feeling of remorse after her useless phrase. She took off her hat before the mirror; the diamonds of her earrings gleamed. All the benefits for which she was beholden to this man, who exacted so little in return, came into her mind at once, and it was a genuine movement—false positions admit of these paradoxes of conscience—which led her to sit upon the arm of Desforges chair and whisper to him:

"But I should have been too disappointed myself. So you will never believe I feel real joy in coming here." "I owe him that," she thought, and in continuation of this same curious sentiment of justice she was, during the whole of the time they were together, more complaisant and delightful than usual; so much so in fact that an hour and a half after her arrival, while she was almost buried in one of the big arm-chairs, eating tiny sandwiches and drinking a little incomparable Spanish wine, Desforges, who was watching her coquettish way of eating, could not help saying:

"Ah! Suzanne! at my age! What would Noirot say?" Noirot, whose face suddenly flashed across the Baron's mind, was a doctor who came every morn-

ing to carefully massage him and look after his health. Everything in his life of systematic pleasure was calculated, even to the quantity of exercise he took every day. He had received into his house a poor and pious relative, to whose good works he every year contributed a large sum. When he was complimented upon his generosity he replied, with the half-mocking cynicism so common in him, "What would you have? One must prepare a nurse for one's old age. I shall be my cousin's patient, and the most carefully-nursed one in Paris." Usually such sallies of blatant egoism amused the young woman. She found at the root of them a conception of life the absolute materialism of which was not displeasing to her. When he pronounced his doctor's name she fixed her eyes upon him; he appeared to her, by the light of the single lamp, in this moment of weariness, almost broken, with a revelation of his age upon the wrinkled mask of his face, his drooping moustache, his swollen eyes; and she involuntarily received a real notion of the ugliness of his life. It is a horrible thing for a young and beautiful woman to submit to the caresses of a man she does not love, even when the man is young, when he is passionate, when he is in love. But when he is upon the verge of old age, when he has paid for his privileges, sorrow and disgust are the only accompaniments of such a love affair. Desforges appeared old in the eyes of Suzanne, for the first time perhaps, and by an irresistible reaction of the whole of her soul she evoked in contrast the fresh mouth and juvenile face of the man whose memory had pursued her for two days. Ah! Kisses with this young man, kisses given

without stint, without the chilly background of hygiene and calculation. She was too foolish to have hesitated a moment, and as she was a person of decision she began to act at once. She was dressed, her hat on, her gloves buttoned, and she said to Desforges, before putting on her veil:

"When will you come and lunch with me? You used to be always dropping in. It was so pleasant."

"I cannot come to-morrow," he said, "nor the following day, but the day after."

"Tuesday then? That is settled. In the evening we go to Madam de Sermoises', do we not?"

"What a charming woman," the Baron thought when he was left alone. She could have so many love affairs, yet she thinks of nothing but pleasing me."

"The day after to-morrow then," Suzanne said to herself, as she traversed the pavement of the Rue Mont Thabor, taking the precaution to glance from side to side so cleverly that her eyes did not appear to move. "I am quite sure to be alone. But what excuse am I to make to René" (she already called him by that name in her mind) "for inviting him? Good! a few lines to write for a lady upon a copy of *Sigisbée*." She passed in the Rue Castiglione a book shop. She went in to buy the play. It was one of those moments when the execution follows the plan with almost mechanical rapidity. "Provided he does not do anything imprudent before then. If he continues to love me, and nobody tells him anything against me." Claude came into her mind again. "Ah! there lies the danger," she thought, and she also saw a way of avoiding it, providing she had a talk with René first.

She reflected that she did not know the young man's address. She had only to pay Madam Komof a visit. "She is at home after six." She called a cab and drove to the Rue de Bel Respiro. She chanced to find the Countess alone, and had no trouble in obtaining the information she required. The good woman, whose party had been a success, was not silent about her poet.

• "Ideal!" she said with her exaggerated gestures. "Delightful! And modest!"

"Do you know where he lives?" Suzanne inquired. "He called upon me and simply left his name."

When her note was written and dispatched she lived in that state of uncertainty upon which newborn love feeds. Would René come? Would he not come? If he came how would he enter? She would see at the first glance whether any cloud had dimmed the clear memory she was sure she had left him of herself at their meeting the other day. At last the time she had fixed in her note arrived, and when the servant showed the young man in her heart beat more quickly perhaps than that of her unsophisticated lover. She looked at him and read his very soul. Yes, she was still to him the Madonna she had extemporised on their first meeting with that skill in metamorphosis which distinguishes a Proteus in skirts. There was in his blue and tender eyes the most touching mixture of joy and timidity; joy at seeing her again so quickly at her invitation in the same little drawing-room; timidity at appearing before this angel of purity after allowing himself to look for her at the Opera and wait for her at the corner of the street. The gracious comedienne had this time arranged her

beauty with a different setting. She was seated near the window, engaged upon a sort of fringe with silk and pins upon a green cloth background. Behind her, the guipure curtains raised up by their loops, gave through the glass a view of the landscape of the Monceau Park, the pale azure of the sky, the grey trees, the brown turf, and near the ruins the dark green of the ivy. A February sun lit up this chilly landscape, and its rays caressed Suzanne's hair with soft golden tints. A dress made for indoors, white with violet embroidery, of a fantastic shape, and fitted with large open sleeves, gave her the appearance of a chatelaine of the Middle Ages. Her feet, in silk stockings of the same shade as the embroidery of her dress, were modestly crossed upon a footstool. If anyone had recalled to her mind that less than forty-eight hours before those same modest feet were walking about a flat, that the same hair was being fondled by an aged lover who paid her, that, in fact, she was the venal mistress of Desforges, perhaps she would have answered that reminder in the negative, and in all sincerity too, so much did her desire to please René make her enter into the spirit of the part she was playing. The poet did not see so far. He had spent three days in a state of continuous exaltation, feeling his love increase hour by hour, and so glad to feel it. At twenty-five the approach of love attracts as much as at thirty-five it terrifies. Suzanne's note had placed in his hands a palpable proof that the little indiscretions he had considered a crime had not displeased; at all times when it is a question very dear to our hearts we are always finding fresh reasons for doubt,

and this great boy had the *naïveté* to tremble at the thought of the reception awaiting him. So, what was his delight at being received by the gesture of simple familiarity, the clear eyes, the sweetness of the smile, of the woman whom he at once compared in his mind, as she sat in the foreground of the winter landscape, to one of those saints behind whom primitive painters develop a horizon of water and verdure. But she was a saint whose dress had been made by the first dress-maker in Paris, a saint who at every movement disseminated that heliotrope perfume which had already so troubled the young man; and this saint also displayed, through the indentations of her long open sleeves, an arm around which two golden bracelets coiled, while the down upon it gleamed delightfully in the sunlight, as did her hair.

What René had so greatly feared had not taken place. Madam Moraines made allusion neither to the Opera nor to their meeting at the corner of the street. During the early part of his visit she went on with her work, having led the conversation quite naturally, by way of Madam Komof's enthusiasm, to plans for the young man's future. She talked, though she could not have distinguished Beranger from Hugo, or Voltaire from Lamartine, like a person solely engaged in literature. She had met Théophile Gautier two or three times in the days of the Empire, and besides hardly bestowed a glance upon him, so greatly lacking was he in British elegance, but that did not prevent her, after divining René's enthusiasm, from describing to him the great writer in detail. He had so interested her. She must even have letters from him.

"I will look for them for you," she said; then, taking this untruth as her text, "I have reproached myself for worrying you by asking you for an autograph. But my friend starts for Russia to-morrow."

"What shall I write?" the young man asked.

"What you please," she said as she got up. She went to get the play, then placed it on the little leather-covered desk. She prepared everything to make the task easier for him, opening the silver ink-stand, and fixing the nib in the tortoise-shell and gold pen-holder; in doing that she brushed against René, enveloping him with the rustle of her sleeves and the perfume of her person, so much that the poet's hand trembled a little as he copied upon the fly-leaf of the book a few lines from the play.

When he had finished Madam Moraines picked up the book, and standing behind him, as if talking to herself, read the lines in a sweet, though almost inaudible voice. She uttered no word of praise nor of criticism. She remained in silence, after reciting the lines, as if their music caressed her reverie. René looked at her with almost maddening emotion. How could he resist that supreme, adorable flattery she had just imagined to seduce the young man, and which was partly directed at his secret artist's vanity, and partly at his finest sensation of beauty. For she had posed herself so cleverly for her reading. She recognised only too well the charm of her face, thus three-quarters visible, the eyes lost. They were drooped down towards the poet, those beautiful eyes, his verses had just caused such emotion. For a little they would have asked forgiveness of the dream into

which they had wandered. She seemed to dispose, in order not to profane them, these visions of poesy, and with a curiosity as real this time as her emotion had been apparent.

"I would wager," she said, "you did not write the lines for the play?"

"Quite true," René said as he felt himself blushing again. He would have had scruples about lying to this woman even to please her. But how to tell her the unworthy story of which he had, with that power of transposition in the ideal proper to poets, summed up the melancholy in his romance.

"Ah! you men," she went on without insisting, "how you come and go in life, how free you are! At least do not take that as a complaint. We others, Christian wives, our part is to obey, that is the most beautiful." Then after a silence, "Alas! We do not always choose our master." She added, in a resigned and proud tone of voice, which at the same time authorised and forbade all reflections: "I regret so much not yet being able to introduce you to M. Moraines. You will find him a charming man. He is not much taken with art, but he has great business capacity. Unfortunately we live in a period when it is necessary to be of Israel to rise very high." Jew-hating was, it may well be believed, quite foreign to Suzanne, who reckoned among her pleasant functions two or three dinners in Jewish mansions, where the hospitality was princely, but she thought that phrase would complete the religious tone she wished to give herself in the young man's eyes. "You will find my husband a little cold at first," she went on; "my

dream was to have a circle of artists and authors. But you know these gentlemen are a little jealous of you all, and besides, M. Moraines does not care much about Society. He was not present the other evening. He only visits among his most intimate friends."

She talked like this, with an air of constraint which seemed to say to René, "Forgive me if I cannot invite you here as I should like to do." That air of constraint signified, too, that the gracious woman had—oh! without complaint!—been sacrificed in her marriage to those cold social considerations which do not take sentiment into account. Already in René's imagination the amiable, even jovial, Paul Moraines appeared as a crotchety husband, difficult to endure, to whom this creature of superior rank had been bound by the irksome chain of duty. He felt for her, besides the love which possessed him, one of those movements of pity which women love the more to inspire the less they deserve them. He dared to say, saving by the generality of the idea the directness of his reply:

"If you only knew, madam, how often I have been seized with a desire, when chance has led my footsteps to the Champs Elysées, to be the confidant of the sorrow which I believed I saw upon some faces. I have always thought that luxurious grief, the moral distress in the midst of material happiness, must be to be pitied most of all."

She looked at him as if she were surprised by this speech. She had in her eyes the delighted and involuntary astonishment of the woman who had suddenly come upon in a man the unexpected expression

of a shade of sentimentality she believed reserved for her own sex.

"I think we shall quickly become friends," she said, "for we have hearts much alike. Are you like me? I believe in instinctive sympathies and antipathies, and I also believe that I can feel when I am not loved. So—perhaps I am wrong in saying this—but I am talking to you in confidence as if I had known you all my life—your friend, M. Larcher, I am sure I am not in sympathy with him."

She displayed real emotion as she uttered this sentence. She was going to find out to a certainty, not whether Claude had spoken ill of her—she had guessed he had not on her visitor's entrance—but if René was discreet. She was not ignorant of the fact that in a love affair the dangerous moments for imprudent confidences are those at the beginning and at the end. The only trustworthy men are those capable of keeping silent when their hearts overflow with hope or bitterness. From René's reply she would judge a part of his character, and in the scheme of the startlingly rapid love affair she had in mind the young man's trustworthiness was a vital factor. It was only too natural that he had from the first told Claude of his new-born love, and he might have done so in Colette's presence. To Suzanne, who could not take that detail into account, silence was a promise of discretion which made her ardent when she received it.

"We have not spoken of you between ourselves," the young man said, "but, as you said only too truly the other evening, he has always made a speciality of sad love affairs, and he takes into Society the

melancholy of such an existence. If you were to see him with the woman he has the misfortune to love now."

"That is no reason," Suzanne said, "for taking his revenge upon others by paying them attentions haphazard. I had almost to get angry one day when I dined next to him. I know he has made unkind remarks about me, but I have forgiven him."

"Now, Claude can speak," she thought, when René had departed with a promise to come again in three days' time, at the same hour, with a selection of his unpublished verses. She looked in the glass entirely satisfied with herself. The interview had been successful; she had made René understand she could hardly receive him; she had made him mistrust his best friend; she had completed his infatuation. "He is mine," she said to herself, and this time she was sincere in her profound joy.

CHAPTER X

IN THE SNARE

SUZANNE thought herself very clever, and she was right, but sometimes too skilful cunning recoils upon its author. Used to the mingling of love and gallantry, she was unaware of the generosity and expansion of sentiment in a being as young as the man upon whom her half-romantic, half-sensual caprice had lighted. According to her calculations the treacherous phrase she had launched against Claude would make René distrustful. On the contrary, its result was to give the poet an irresistible longing to talk to Larcher. It was grief to him to think that his friend had an unjust opinion of Madam Moraines. Which one of us at twenty-five has not experienced the desire for our best friend to set a place apart in his esteem for the woman we love? It is as strong as is at forty the wise desire to hide her first of all from that same friend. René's first act, directly he left Suzanne, was to go in the direction of the Rue de Varenne. He had not been to Larcher's rooms since the day he had met Colette there, and as he opened the heavy gate and crossed the large courtyard of the mansion of the Saint Euvertes he could not help making a comparison between the two visits. By what an abyss were they separated in so short a time. The young man was a

victim of that delightful fever which renders all reasoning impossible. He did not tell himself that his Madonna had been very expert to lead him on as far in so short a time. The frightful rapidity of the progress of this love was only a delightful experience to him. It showed all the better its strength. He felt himself to be so light, so happy, that he ascended the old staircase two steps at a time, just as he had done as a boy on his return from school when he was at the top of the class. The servant on this occasion showed him in without any hesitation, but with such a long and solemn countenance that René asked him the reason.

"Is it reasonable, sir?" Ferdinand growled, shaking his head; "the master has been indoors for forty-eight hours, with not more than six hours' sleep, and he keeps on writing, writing, writing! Ah, sir, you ought to tell him he will end by destroying his health. Could he not do a little work every day gently, like another person, and lead a normal existence?"

The wise servant's lament prepared René for a sight with which he was quite familiar: that of the apartment where Colette reigned transformed into a copy workshop. He went in. Upon the leather couch, instead of the graceful and perverse actress, sheets of paper, covered with the author's large, irregular writing, lay just where they had been thrown haphazard. Bits of similar paper crumpled up strewed the carpet. Unfolded proofs filled the mantelshelf, and at his desk Larcher was working, clad anyhow, in a stained jacket without buttons, his feet in slippers very much down at heel, a silk handkerchief tied like

a cord around his neck, his hair ruffled, and a three days' growth of beard upon his chin. The more than careless Bohemianism of his youth reappeared in the man-about-town with pretensions to elegance every time a fresh effort brought him back to his real nature. Now these efforts occurred frequently. Like all literary men, whose time is their sole capital, and who consequently do not order their lives with regularity, Claude was always behind with his work, and money, especially since his love affair with Colette had led him into the most ruinous expenses, such as young men lavish upon mistresses they do not keep. The actress, besides her salary, had an income of twenty thousand francs left her by an old lover, a great Russian noble who was killed at Plevna; but carriages, bouquets, dinners and presents followed each other, demanding bank-notes and more bank-notes. The two comedies were now non-productive, and Claude earned these bank-notes, in the intervals of enervating debauchery, by overtaxing his brain.

"You see," he said, lifting his pale face, and pressing René's fingers with a feverish hand, "I am still at work. Fifteen stories to be done at once. A fine commission from the *Chronique Parisienne*, the new eight-page paper for which Audry is finding the money. They came the other day to ask me for a novel. A franc a line. I told them I had only to re-copy it. But, my dear fellow, there was not a word of it written. But I had an idea. It was to re-dress *Adolphe* in modern guise, with notation, our colour, and our sense of atmosphere. It will be, of course, adapted. Ah! if it were only that! But do you know what it

is to write with all the vipers of jealousy in your heart? I am at my desk occupied in turning a phrase; an idea has come to me, I am about to use it. Well then! A voice suddenly says to me, 'What is Colette doing?' Then I put down my pen, and I am bad, very bad. Ah! how I suffer! Balzac pretended he had calculated the cerebral exhaustion of a night of love. A half-volume, and he added, 'There is no woman worth two volumes a year.' What foolishness! It is not physical love which wears out an artist, but this anxiety, this fixed idea, this continual beating of the heart. Can a man think and feel at the same time? He must choose. Hugo never felt anything, nor did this same Balzac. If he had loved his Madam Hanska he would have followed her right across Europe with as much thought for the *Comédie Humaine* as I have for this trash." He picked up the sheets scattered over his desk. "Ah, my dear René!" he went on, in an oppressed fashion, "keep your simple life. I hope you have not let yourself be coaxed by invitations into visiting all the snobs we met at the Countess's."

"I have only paid one visit," René answered. "Guess to whom? To Madam Moraines." He experienced emotion even in pronouncing her name. Then, with the involuntary impulse of a lover, who, having come to talk of his mistress, recoils from the conversation and turns aside criticism, as he would ward off with his hand the point of a weapon, he added, "Is she not adorably pretty and graceful, and with such lofty ideas too! Do you think badly of her as well as the others?"

"Bah!" Claude said, for being preoccupied with his own sufferings he had lent an indifferent ear to René's words, "if her past or present were investigated some shameful action would be discovered. Every woman has a canker in her heart."

"Then do you know anything about her?" the poet asked.

- "I!" Claude said, astonished by his friend's altered tones. He looked at the young man and understood. Launched as he was in Parisian society, he had long known the rumours as to Suzanne's relations with Baron Desforges, and he believed them, with that *naïveté* peculiar to misanthropes which makes them first admit the infamy as probable. Sometimes they are deceived. For a moment he was tempted to warn René of those rumours. He kept silent. Was it from prudence, and in order not to make an enemy of Desforges in case Suzanne should find out he had spoken and repeat his words to the Baron? Or was it out of pity for the grief his words would cause René? Or was it from a cruel delight in seeing a companion in misfortune—for of Suzanne and Colette, who was the more unworthy? Or was it even from analytical curiosity and a desire to assist at another man's passion? Who shall decide upon the infinitely complex motives of which a sudden determination is the result? Still Claude, after a short pause, as if searching his memory, concluded his phrase like this, "Do I know anything about her? Not the least bit in the world. I am a professional woman-hater, as the English people say. I only know her from meeting her occasionally in Society, and I have come to the conclusion that she

is not quite so stupid as the majority of women. It is quite true that she is very pretty." Then out of malice, or to sound René, he added, "My compliments."

"You talk as if I were in love with her," René replied with a blush of shame. He had entered with the idea of singing Suzanne's praises to his friend, and now Claude's bantering tone cut short that confidence, even on his lips, as with a chill, sharp blade.

"Ah! you are not in love!" the other man replied with a detestable, jeering laugh. Then, with a display of kinder feeling, when his better nature assumed the upper hand, he said, "Forgive me," and he pressed the young man's hand. He read in the latter's eyes that his words and gesture were about to provoke an effusion, so he stopped him. "Tell me nothing. You would be sorry afterwards. I should be such a bad listener to-day. I am suffering too keenly, and that makes me unkind."

So even Suzanne's false move turned in favour of her plan of captivation. The only man whose hostility she had to fear had just condemned himself to silence. As René had need to pour out to a confidant his overflowing emotions, it was to Emilie that he turned, and poor Emilie, with a sister's naïve vanity, found herself in advance the confederate of the unknown woman whom she saw through her brother's eyes, as surrounded with a halo of aristocraticness. On the morning after the party at the Countess's she had understood, from the young man's story, that Madam Moraines was the only one of all the women he had met the evening before who really

pleased him, and she had also guessed that she was the only one upon whom the poet had produced a personal and marked impression. Mothers and sisters possess something like a peculiar sense of recognising such shades of feeling. It had not required much effort on her part to notice René's preoccupation during the following days. Bound to him by the double tie of moral resemblance and affection, no sentiment could traverse her brother's heart without her feeling the shock. She had seen that René was in love as clearly as if she had assisted, from a hiding-place, at the two conversations in the Rue Murillo. This love had delighted her, without her being jealous of it, whereas she had formerly been jealous, as much as anxious, about her brother's love affair with Rosalie. With the logic peculiar to women she found it quite natural that the poet should begin his intrigues with a woman who was not free. She admitted that to exceptional men a special life and code of morality was necessary, and this love for a great lady, though it satisfied the dreams of pride formed for her idol, she felt, would not take possession of any part of him. The passion for Rosalie, on the contrary, had appeared to her like a robbery of her love. The fact was Rosalie was like her, she was of her own set, and so René could only become attached to her with the intention of marrying her and forming a fresh family circle. Consequently she had a wave of silent joy at the sight of her brother's new-born love. She would have liked his fresh confidences to have come at once in order to complete those he had made her on his awakening but a few hours after he left Madam Komof's. These con-

fidences had not come, and she had not provoked them. Her loving perception told her that the opening of René's heart would be more complete if it were spontaneous. She therefore waited, watching in the depths of those eyes, each glance of which she knew so well, the signs of that joyful exaltation which is like the fever of happiness. She was the more silent because she hardly saw René except in Fresneau's presence. With the cowardice so natural in certain false positions the poet left the house as soon as he got up, and did not return till lunch-time. He again escaped till dinner-time, and he went out again afterwards to avoid any chance of meeting Rosalie. The professor did not even notice his change of habits, so great was his mental distraction. It was not the same with Madam Offarel, who, after coming two consecutive evenings with her daughters, and not seeing the man she considered her prospective son-in-law, did not fear to emphasise his unusual absence.

"So M. Larcher," she said, "introduces M. René to a fresh countess every evening, that is why we never see him here nor at our own house."

"Quite true," Fresneau insisted, "we never see him now. Where does he get to?"

"He is working at his *Savonarole*," Emilie replied, "and he spends his evenings at the library."

The morning after this conversation took place, which happened to be the day after his second visit to Suzanne, the faithful sister entered her brother's room to report it to him. She found him preparing several sheets of Japanese paper, of which she had made him a present some time before. He proposed to

copy out in his best handwriting those of his verses he would read to Madam Moraines. The table was covered with sheets blackened with uneven lines. They were his poems which he had already run through. Emilie told him her innocent untruth, and he kissed her joyfully as he said:

"How clever you are!"

• "I am your sister, and I love you," she replied; "it is too simple." Picking up some of the scattered papers, "Have you really made up your mind to prepare your volume?"

"No," he said, "but I am to read a selection of my verses to a lady."

"Madam Moraines," said Emilie, quickly.

"You have guessed right," the young man replied somewhat uneasily. "Ah! if you knew!"

Then came the overflow of his pent-up confidences. Emilie had to listen to an enthusiastic eulogy of Suzanne and all her ways. René spoke to her in the same phrase of this woman's admirable nobility of ideas, and of the shape of her tiny shoes, of her wonderful intelligence and of her velvet writing-case. This childish wonder before the minutiae of luxury did not cause Emilie any astonishment. Had not she, in her love for her brother, always associated with him the loftiest ambitions? She would have desired, for example, almost as ardently him to have genius as horses, to have written *Childe Harold* as to actually possess Lord Byron's income of £4000 a year. She was upon this point as naïvely plebeian as he was, though it was after all excusable for people of their class to confuse the real aristocracy of sentiments with

the apparent aristocracy of the outward appearances of life. When one belongs to a family which has known the moral depression of business, the second of these appears so like the first. So the details, which might have made an evil-minded listener believe that René loved Suzanne for her surroundings and not for herself, charmed Emilie instead of shocking her, and she had so thoroughly espoused her brother's passion that she said to him as she departed:

"You are not for anyone. Go, I will shield you. But you shall show me the verses you are going to read. Select them carefully."

This work of classification and copying soothed the young man's ardour and permitted him to work without too much mental distress till the time of his next visit to the paradise of the Rue Murillo. The hours of solitude, interrupted only by talks with Emilie, led either to a feeling of happiness or to one of strange melancholy. Sometimes the picture of Suzanne appeared to his delighted imagination. He laid down his pen, and the objects which served as a setting to his labours vanished as if by magic. Instead of the red walls of his room, those of Madam Moraines' little drawing-room met his eyes. He could not see his Albert Durer, his Gustave Moreau, his Goya, his private library, in which the *Imitation* rubbed shoulders with *Madam Bovary*, nor the two leafless trees in the garden standing out black against a background of blue sky. Suzanne was near him with her slight and supple gestures, the carriage of her head, the certain shade of light upon the gold of her hair, and the glory of her complexion with its rosy transparency.

The apparition, which had nothing of the pale, unreal phantom about it, appealed to René's senses in a way which ought to have made him understand how much Madam Moraines' attitude masked the real woman in her, the voluptuous and refined courtesan. He did not take it into account, and believed his affection for her was a cult of the most ethereal nature. That is a phenomenon of sentimental mirage frequent enough in honourable men and those who deliver themselves as defenceless victims to the grossest deceptions. This inability to judge their own sensations makes them still more incapable of judging the manoeuvres of the women who move in them all the accumulated treasures of life. The poet, in short, became perfectly lucid when the image of Suzanne gave place to that of Rosalie. In turning over his papers he was continually coming across a page at the head of which he had childishly written, "For the flower;" that was how he designed Rosalie in those far-off days when he loved her. In those days he composed a great poem for her almost every day. When these verses came under his notice he had to lay down his pen again, and the things around him once more vanished, but this time to give place to a tormenting vision. The Offarels' flat appeared cold and silent. The old mother was coming and going among her cats. Angelique was turning over the leaves of her English dictionary, and Rosalie was looking at him, René. Yes, she was looking at him through space with eyes without reproach, but with a look of infinite distress in them. He knew, as if he had been close to her, both the grief of her jealousy and how she had guessed his

secret. Without that would he have been afraid of braving those girlish eyes? Ah! if he could go and say to her, "Let us merely be friends from this time forward." It was his duty to act in that way. Absolute loyalty is the sole means one preserves of self-esteem in those exhaustions of love, which are like heart bankruptcies. Then he repulsed this loyalty by that sort of weakness in which egoism had as large a share as pity. He took up his pen again, he said to himself as he had done from the first, "Let us gain time," and he tried to work. He was interrupted by the thought of Rosalie's sufferings. He thought of the nights she spent weeping. For he knew every habit of the simple creature who had given him her heart. She had often told him that the night was the only time she had to give way to her grief when it was too great. Then he leant his head in his hands, and said to himself, "Is it my fault?" till the vision passed away.

A law of our nature wills that our passions are the stronger the greater obstacles there are to be overcome, so that the remorse of his deception as regards Rosalie had as a result the quickening of René's emotion when he kept the appointment made by Madam Moraines. The latter, on her part, awaited him with almost febrile impatience, at which even herself was astonished. She had watched for the young man at the houses she had visited, and at the Opera when Friday came round. If she had met his eyes fixed upon her with that look of naïve adoration, as compromising as a confession, she would have said, "How imprudent he is!" Not seeing him aroused a slight feeling of doubt, which

took her caprice to its highest pitch. She was the more deeply moved by this visit as she considered it decisive. It was the third time she received René, and two of the visits were without her husband's knowledge. She could not, with her own servants, go further. Paul, who did not understand malice, had said to her at dinner two days before:

“Desforbes and I have talked of René Vincy. He has not made a good impression upon the Baron. Decidedly it is better not to view at close quarters the authors whose works one admires.”

If the servant who had shown in the poet had been in the dining-room when her husband pronounced these words Suzanne would have been obliged to speak. The same chance existed for the morrow or any subsequent day. So she had sworn she would find in their conversation a way of making an appointment with René for somewhere other than her own house. At once the idea had come to her of some excursion with the young man, making curiosity the pretext; a meeting at Notre-Dame, for instance, or in some old church far enough from the fashionable part of Paris for her to be practically certain of running no risk. She had reckoned on bringing about the appointment without seeming to do so, by picking out some verse from among these René was to read to her. She was there in out-door dress, for having had that morning to be present at a wedding she had not changed her rather ornamental mauve costume, which became her as well as did evening dress, so much did she prize the contours of her bust and shoulders and the slenderness of her figure. Dressed like this,

sitting in a low easy-chair, which allowed her to show off, by leaning back a little, the adorable line of her body, she begged the young man, after the usual commonplace preliminary remarks, to begin his reading. She listened to him reading his own poetry without astonishment at the special accent, partly chanting and partly drawling, which is often heard in Society. Her motionless face and big, intelligent eyes seemed to indicate the most profound attention. Only occasionally did she utter—it seemed almost in spite of herself—a “How beautiful it is!” or even a “Will you repeat those lines, I like them so much!” In reality the poet’s verses were as unimportant to her as they were unintelligible. To penetrate even superficially the work of a modern artist—who is always the combination of a critic and a scholar—it requires a mental development which is only met with in a few Society women fond enough of mental pleasures to continue to read and think in the midst of a life most directly opposed to study and reflection. The cause of the tenseness of Suzanne’s pretty face and fixity of her blue eyes was her desire not to miss the inevitable word upon which to hang her scheme. But verse followed verse, stanza followed sonnet without her being able to seize upon a word that would justify in plausible fashion the trend she desired to give the conversation. What a pity! For René’s eyes, which were continually leaving his pages, his voice, which quivered at times, the trembling of his hands as he turned over the leaves, all indicated that the comedy of admiration had succeeded in intoxicating him, as it does every author. Only one piece

remained. But this one which the poet had kept for the last, as the best, had a title which was a revelation to Suzanne: "Les Yeux de la Joconde." It was a long enough piece, half metaphysical, half descriptive, in which the author believed himself original in putting into sonorous verse all the common topics which our age has multiplied around this masterpiece. Perhaps one must see simply, in this portrait of an Italian woman, a study of the most frank and technical naturalism, one of those struggles against trade which appear to have been the principal preoccupation of Leonard. Would he not have wished to seize that indiscernible thing, a face in motion, and paint that which is but an instantaneously - departing shadow, the passing of the serious mouth to a smile? Still René, childishly proud that his name resembled the name of the village which serves to designate the most subtle of the masters of the Renaissance, had condensed into thirty strophes an entire philosophy of nature and history. He would have given for this symbolical pot-pourri all the scenes of *Sigisbée*, which were merely natural and passionate — two qualities good for idlers! What was then his delight at hearing Madam Moraines' voice saying:

"If I allowed myself a preference I believe that is the piece which would please me most. How you realise Art. With you one ought to see the works of the great painters. I am sure if I went to the Louvre in your company you would show me in the pictures so many things I divine without understanding. I have often made long visits to the Louvre, but alone."

She waited. Since René had begun reading the last piece she was saying to herself, "How stupid of me not to have thought of it sooner," while she half closed her eyes as if the better to retain a beautiful dream. She had uttered the phrase with the idea that he certainly would not let slip the chance of seeing her again. He would suggest a visit to the Louvre, and she would agree, after cleverly and sufficiently protecting herself. She saw the question on his lips, and also that he dared not formulate it. Then she went on:

"If I were not afraid of robbing you of your time."

Then with a sigh:

"Besides, we hardly know one another well enough."

"Ah! madam," the young man said, "I seem to have been your friend for so long."

"You realise how little of the coquette there is about me," she replied with a kind and frank smile.

"I am going to prove it to you once more. Will you show me the Louvre one day during the coming week?"

CHAPTER XI

DECLARATIONS

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THE rendezvous had been made for the following Tuesday in the Salon Carré. While a cab was taking her in the direction of the old palace, Suzanne calculated for the tenth time the dangers of her morning escapade. "No, it is not very reasonable," she concluded, "and if Desforgés knows I have gone out? Bah! there is the dentist. If I meet anyone of my acquaintance? That is hardly likely. Ah, well, I will tell just as much of the truth as I am compelled." That was one of her great principles: to lie as little as possible, frequently preserve silence, and never discuss proved facts. She could see herself telling her husband, or even the Baron if necessary, "I went into the Louvre as I passed this morning. I was fortunate enough to meet Countess Komof's young poet there, and he showed me round a little. How interesting he was!" "Yes," she replied to herself, "for once that will pass muster. But it would be madness to do it often." Other and less dryly positive ideas then engrossed her. The anticipation of what would take place at this meeting with René moved her more profoundly than she would have liked to admit. She had played the Madonna with

him, and the moment had come to descend from the altar upon which the young man had so piously worshipped her. Her woman's instinct had contrived a bold plan: lead the poet on to a declaration, reply by a confession of her own sentiments, then flee as if a victim of remorse. This scheme ought, by agitating René's heart, to suspend in him all judgment and obtain absolution for all her folly. It was bold, but subtle, and above all simple. Still, it was not without real difficulties. Let the poet display a moment's distrust and all was lost. Suzanne's heart beat at the very thought. How many women have found themselves like her in the strange position of having put the most complex deception at the service of their sincerity, so much so in fact that they must continue their fictitious personality in order that their real sentiments may obtain satisfaction. When the men, for whom these women in their loving hypocrisy have played a part, discover this deception, they usually become indignant and contemptuous in a way which shows how much vanity there is at the root of almost all love affairs. "Come," Suzanne said to herself, "I am trembling like a schoolgirl." She smiled at the thought, which was a pleasure to her, because it proved once more the reality of the sentiment she felt, and she smiled again, when she got out of the cab and crossed the square courtyard, at seeing by the great clock that she was punctual to the minute. "Still the schoolgirl," she repeated to herself. Then she felt a little spasm of fear at the idea

that if René came after her he would see her, the woman who had boasted of her frequent visits, asking her way into the museum. She had not been there three times in her life, yet her dainty feet crossed the courtyard, in their laced boots, as if they had known the way for years. "How childish I am," went on the inner voice, the voice of Desforges' pupil, as well experienced in life as an old diplomat. "He is there and has been waiting for me for half an hour." She could not help casting an inquiring glance around her while she made inquiries of one of the attendants. But her coquettish presentiments were not mistaken, and she was no sooner at the door leading from the Galerie d'Apollon to the Salon Carré, than she saw René leaning against the railing beneath the beautiful decorative canvas by Veronese representing Madeleine washing the Saviour's feet, and facing the famous "Noces de Cana." In his childish timidity the poor boy had believed it his duty to put on his best clothes to meet the woman who was to him, besides a Madonna, the typical Society lady—the sort of vague, chimerical entity which floats before the gaze of so many young burgesses. He was wearing his most attractive frock-coat. Although the morning was very cold he had no overcoat. He only possessed one, and that was still in the hands of the tailor to whom his friend Larcher had given him an introduction. With his tall and shapely top hat quite new, his new gloves and boots, he had almost succeeded in giving himself a fashion-plate appearance, which contrasted comically enough with his romantic face. He might

have made himself still more ridiculous had he chose, as Suzanne found in this ridiculous appearance reasons for liking him all the more. Women in love are like that. She reflected that he had been afraid of not being handsome enough to please her, and she stopped at the door for a few seconds to enjoy the anxiety which the young man's naïve face expressed. When he caught sight of her, what a sudden rush of blood there was to his face, framed in his silky, golden beard. What a gleam there was in his anxious blue eyes. "It is a good thing there is no one watching me approach him," she thought; but the white light which fell from the glass roof of the salon only showed, besides themselves, painters occupied in arranging their easels or their steps for the day's work, and tourists, guide-book in hand. Suzanne, who made sure of their solitude by a glance round, could then give way to the pleasure which René's emotion caused her as he came to meet her, and in a voice quivering with emotion said:

"Ah! I hardly hoped you would come."

"Why not?" she replied with an air of surprised candour. "Do you think I am unable to get up early? When I go to visit my poor people I am up and dressed at eight o'clock." And the way it was said! In a tone at the same time modest and gay, that of a person who does not consider she is saying anything extraordinary, so natural does it seem to her, or in the tone of an officer saying, "When we charged the enemy." The joke was that never in her life had she so much as ventured to put her foot inside a poor

home. She had a horror of misery, as of sickness and old age, and her elegant egoism almost ignored charity. But the man who at that moment laid bare that egoism to René would have appeared to him as the most infamous of blasphemers. She remained a moment, after uttering the "lay sister of mercy" phrase, to note its effect. René's eyes betokened that beautiful faith which seems to such pretty actresses so legitimate a debt that they glibly say of those who refuse it that they have no heart. Then, as if to withdraw from an admiration which embarrassed her simplicity, she went on:

"You forget you are my guide to-day. I will act like one who knows nothing about all these pictures. I will see if we have similar tastes."

"Well," René thought, "suppose I show her pictures which give her a bad opinion of me." The most commonplace women excel, if they so desire, in thus giving a man, who is superior to them in every way, a feeling of inferiority. But they were already on their way, and he was taking her to the masterpieces he thought would please her. The large and small halls of this beloved museum he knew so well. There was not one of these pictures to which was not attached the memory of some youthful reverie, entirely passed in adorning with images of beauty the inner chapel which we all have in us before we are twenty—a holy place which our passions quickly transform into an evil abode. Those pale, noble frescoes by *Luini*, which display their pious scenes in the narrow room on the right of the *Salon Carré*,

before which he had often come to pray, when he desired to give to his poetry the suave charm, the broad and tender style of the old Lombard master. Of the stiff and powerful " *Mise en Croix* " by Mantegna, in the other little salon, at the entrance of the great gallery, a portion detached from the magnificent painting of the church of San Zeno at Verona, he had taken his fill with his eyes for hours at a time, as he had also done of the most adorable of the Raphaels, that of Saint George launching a furious sword-thrust at the dragon—the ideal hero he looked as he spurred a white horse with red accoutrements upon a fresh green meadow, just like youth and hope! But portraits in particular had been the objects of his most fervent pilgrimages, from those of Holbein, Phillipe de Champaigne and Titian to that of the fine mysterious woman, with a monogram in her hair, simply attributed by the catalogue to the Venetian school. He loved to think, with a learned critic, that this monogram meant Barbarelli and Cecilia—the name of Giorgione and of the mistress for whom legend says the great artist died. This romantic and tragic legend he had formerly related to Rosalie on a visit to the Louvre, at the same spot and in front of the same portrait. He surprised himself telling it to Suzanne in almost identical words:

" The painter loved her and she deceived him with one of his friends. He has represented himself, in a picture which is in Vienna, watching with his fine, sad eyes that friend approach him, and in the hand of

the Judas, which he holds behind his back, gleams the hilt of a dagger."

Yes, the same words! When he had told it to Rosalie she had lifted her eyes to him with a look which distinctly³ said, "How can a woman deceive the man she loves?" But she had not uttered the words, whereas Suzanne, after directing a strangely curious glance upon the enigmatic woman with thin lips and penetrating eyes, sighed as she shook her blonde head.

"And yet she looks so sweet. It is frightful to think that a person with so pure a face can lie."

As she spoke she turned to the young man her eyes, which were as clear as Rosalie's were dark, and he felt a strange sensation of remorse contract his heart. By one of these ironies of life, which the secret contrast of consciences produces, Suzanne, entranced by this walk amid the pictures she pretended to gaze at, amused herself by the delights of the impression her beauty produced upon her companion, and not a cloud passed over her happiness, while he, the candid child, reproached himself, as with a double treachery, for conducting this ideal creature through the gallery he had already traversed with another. The fatal comparison which, since his meeting with Madam Moraines, dimmed and discoloured in his mind poor little Offarel, became stronger than ever. The phantom of his betrothed hovered in front of him, humble like her, and he looked at Suzanne as she walked—the living sister of the aristocratic beauties created upon canvas by the masters of the past. Her golden

hair gleamed beneath her hat. Her bust was moulded by a short astrachan jacket. The grey cloth of her skirt fell in supple folds. She carried in her hand a muff to match her corsage, from which the corner of an embroidered handkerchief peeped out, and she occasionally raised the little muff above her eyes, to shade the light so that she could see a picture properly. Ah! how great an advantage does the present woman have over the absent one, and the smart one over the modest creature, the simple young girl—so much the more when, as in Suzanne's case, all the delicacy of æsthetic taste seemed to unite in her exquisite charm of aspect and attitude? The woman, who could not have distinguished a Rembrandt from a Pérugin, or a Ribeira from a Watteau, so absolute was her ignorance, had a way of listening to all that René was telling her and an art of entering into the sense of his ideas which would have deceived cleverer connoisseurs of female duplicity than this poet of twenty-five. There was even for him in this visit something so complete, such an absolute realisation of his most secret chimera, that this last attainment made him suffer. Time went on and he felt himself overcome by an indefinable emotion in which everything was mingled. Nervous excitement, into which the sight of masterpieces always throws an artist, remorse for guilty duplicity, as for a profanation of his past by his present, and of his present by his past, and the feeling, too, of the inexorable flight of that hour. Yes, it was coming to an end, that pleasant hour which so many others, empty, cold and dark followed,

and never, never would he dare to ask his adorable companion to pay another visit. She, the mental Epicurean, was engaged in prolonging the delight of her moral possession of the young man. Voluptuously and cleverly she studied him, without appearing to do so, out of the corner of her blue eyes, which looked so sweet between their long golden lashes. She did not take an exact account of all the shades of ideas he produced. She already knew his inner nature very well, but she was ignorant of almost all the positive facts of his existence. She could not follow in detail the variations of his thoughts, but she had no trouble in discovering that now he looked at her much more than he did the pictures, and also that his distress grew minute by minute. She attributed his distress to an access of timidity, which she was very pleased to meet. She could better measure the abyss which separated her dear René—as she already called him to herself—from the bold and daring men of the world who composed her usual circle. The looks he gave her were looks of love. There was suffering in them too, and that suffering persuaded her at last to make the declaration she had planned to provoke.

“ Ah! ” she suddenly cried, leaning one hand upon the rail which runs along in front of the pictures, and lifting a face to René, the smile of which concealed a sharp pain. “ It is nothing, ” she added, seeing that the young man was overwhelmed. “ I only twisted my foot slightly upon the slippery floor, and standing upon one of her legs and putting forward the supposedly injured one she moved it in her soft boot

with a graceful effort. "Ten minutes' rest and I shall not feel it, but you will have to serve as my crutch."

She pronounced these sad words with her youthful mouth, as she took the poet's arm, while he helped her almost piously to walk, without a suspicion that this imaginary accident was but one more little episode in the comedy of love in which he was acting his part quite in good faith. She took care to lean a little, so that the weight of her body fell upon him, so that her throat brushed the young man's elbow and made him tremble, so that this sensation of communicated movement might complete his intoxication. This scheme succeeded only too well. He could no longer talk, so invaded, penetrated and possessed was he by this woman's presence, while now he breathed in more distinct fashion her imperceptible perfume. Hardly did he dare to look at her, and see quite close to him her profile at the same time arch and proud, her ideally rosy cheeks, the living purple of her sinuous lips, which a pretty smile of tender malice at times wrinkled; then when their eyes met the smile changed into an expression of open sympathy which reassured René's timidity. She gathered that from the bolder fashion in which he gave her his arm. She had taken care to select for her sham accident one of the most deserted galleries they had passed through. In this way they traversed arm-in-arm a narrow passage; they entered one of the galleries of the French school, and reached a dark and deserted salon, that in which hung the great pictures by Lebrun representing the victories of Alexander. The

galleries of Ingres and Delacroix, which now open from this salon, were not then in existence, and in the middle there was a large green velvet couch. This was a corner in the middle of Paris, more deserted than a country museum, where one could talk for an indefinite period without any other witness than the attendant, who spent his time in gossiping with his colleague in the next room. Suzanne selected the spot at a glance, and she said to René, pointing to the settee:

"Shall we sit down there for a moment? I feel better, already."

Then came another period of silence between them. Everything enveloped them in solitude, from the noise of the courtyard, which indistinctly reached them through the two lofty windows, to the dim light of the salon. The young man's distress increased with this *tête-à-tête*, which ought to have encouraged him to declare himself. He said to himself, "How pretty she is! How refined she is! She will go away and I shall never see her again. I must displease her so, for I feel myself paralysed in her presence and incapable of speech." "Never," Suzanne thought, "shall I have a better opportunity."

"You are sad," she said aloud, looking at him with eyes whose coquetry was disguised by affectionate sympathy, almost that of a sister. "I noticed it on my arrival," she went on, "but I am not sufficiently your friend for you to tell me your troubles."

"No," René said, "I am not sad. Why should I be, as I have only cause for happiness?"

She looked at him again with a surprised and questioning glance which signified, "This cause for happiness, tell me about it." René thought he read that demand in her clear eyes, but he dared not understand it. He judged himself, in all sincerity of conscience so much inferior to this woman, that even to lay bare in its entirety the cult he had already consecrated appeared to him beyond his strength. The whole of Suzanne's seductive intrigue, in which it was impossible to recognise a plan, ceased at once if he spoke, and he went on as if her phrase applied only to the general circumstances of his life. •

"Claude Larcher often tells me I shall have no more beautiful epoch in my literary destiny. There are four moments, he pretends, in an author's existence: when he is ignored, when he is acclaimed to the despair of his elders, when he is defamed because of his triumph, and the fourth when he is pardoned because he is forgotten. Ah! how I regret you do not know him better, he would please you so. If you knew how he loves literature—it is his religion."

"He is a little too naïve all the same," Suzanne thought, but she was too interested in the result of this talk to give way to a display of impatience. She seized upon what René had just said, and replied, in that way interrupting his futile eulogy of Claude, "A religion! It is quite true, you authors feel like that. One of my friends has had a melancholy experience and is always repeating to me, 'A woman ought not to become attached to an artist. He will never love her as much as he does his art.'"

She assumed, in order to recall the words gratuitously borrowed from the friend, as imaginary as the sprain, a sad expression; her red lips parted in a slight smile, that of a soul which has received distressing confidences and foresees like sorrows falling upon herself.

"But you are the one who is sad," René said, struck by the alteration in her pretty face.

"Now," she thought, as she said aloud, "Never mind that. What have my sorrows to do with you?"

"Do you think," René replied, "that I am quite indifferent to you?"

"Indifferent. No," she said with a shake of the head; "but after you have left me will you think of me but as a sympathetic person met by chance and forgotten in the same way?"

Never had she appeared as delightful to René as when she was uttering these words, which went just as far as possible without destroying her handiwork. Her gloved hand was resting upon the velvet couch near the young man. He ventured to take it. She did not withdraw it. Her eyes seemed to be fixed upon a vision in space. Had she even noticed René's action? There are women who have in this way a celestial manner of failing to notice familiarities which are taken with their persons. René pressed the little hand, and as she did not repulse him he began to speak in a voice emotion rather than prudence rendered low.

"Yes, you must think that I have no right to be astonished. Why should you think that my sentiments

regarding you are of a different kind to those of the young men you meet in Society? Yet if I told you that, since the day I spoke to you at Madam Komof's, my life has changed, and for ever—Ah! do not smile. Yes, for ever!—If I told you that I only cherished one desire, to see you again; that I called upon you with a beating heart; that every hour since that time has increased my madness; that I reached here in a state of delight, and that I shall leave you in a condition of despair. Ah! you do not believe me. In romance, such passions, which entirely invade the heart suddenly and for ever, are admitted. Does it not happen in real life? ”

He stopped, bewildered at the phrases he had just uttered. He had not, as he finished his speech, that strange impression which grips us when in a dream we listen to ourselves telling our secret to the person from whom we ought most carefully to conceal it. She had heard him, with her eyes staring in front of her, still absorbed. But her eyelids fluttered more quickly, her breathing was shorter. Her little hand trembled in René's. That was to him so thrilling a surprise, something so intoxicating as well, that he had the courage to resume:

“ Forgive me, forgive me for speaking to you as I have just done! If you only knew! It is childish and mad! When I saw you for the first time it was just as if I recognised you. You are so much like the woman I have dreamed of meeting ever since I have had a heart. Before that meeting I thought I was alive and possessed of feelings. Ah, how mad I was!

How mad I am! I am destroying myself in your eyes, I am lost. But at least I have told you that I love you. You will know it. You shall do with me afterwards as you please. How I love you! how I love you!"

As he looked at her with worship in his glance while he repeated these words into which all his heart's fever overflowed, he saw two tears fall from Suzanne's eyes, slow, soft tears which flowed down her rosy cheeks, leaving tracks upon them. He was not aware that most women weep like this at their pleasure provided that they are at all nervous. Those two poor tears completed his infatuation.

"Ah!" he cried, "you are crying. You—"

"Do not finish." Suzanne interrupted him by putting her hand over his mouth after withdrawing it from René. She fixed upon him eyes in which love was mingled with a kind of fearful surprise. "Yes, you have touched me! You have discovered in me depths I did not expect. Ah! I am afraid—afraid of you, myself, and of being here. No! we must not meet again. I am not free. I ought not to have listened to what you have said." She was silent, then, taking his hand in her own, "But why should I lie to you? All that you feel perhaps I feel too. I did not know it, I swear to you, before this moment. The sympathy to which I yielded, and which caused me to come and meet you this morning—ah! I understand, I understand. Wretch that I am, how the heart allows itself to be surprised."

Fresh tears trembled upon the ends of her lashes.

René was so overwhelmed by the words he had just uttered and heard that he could make no reply but:

"Only tell me you forgive me."

"Yes, I forgive you," she replied, pressing his hand, to his utter discomfiture; then, in a grave voice, "I feel that I love you too." And as if awakened from a dream, "Good-bye, I forbid you to follow me. It is the last time we shall speak."

She got up. Her brow was threatening; her looks betrayed all the alarm of honour in revolt. There was no question now of her sprained ankle or of weariness. She walked straight before her, and with such an incensed manner that the young man, crushed by the scene he had just gone through, saw her go without moving or making any effort to detain her. She had been gone several minutes before he rushed in the direction she had taken. He did not find her. While he descended one staircase after another she had already crossed the square courtyard and got into a cab to drive to the Rue Murillo. As she sat in the corner of the cab she was both malicious and tender. During the time René spent in seeking a way to make her withdraw her resolution for the rupture to be final he did not think of the rapidity with which his pseudo-Madonna had given way and herself made a declaration of love. The memory of the young man's phrases, of his face transfigured by emotion, his excited eyes, delighted her as much as the most ardent declaration of love. She cherished, too, the idea of belonging to him in some calm, discreet and retired retreat. He would write once, twice, and she would not reply. At

the third or fourth letter she would make out believing his suicide threat and she would give way—to save him! As she was engaged in these reflections, chance, sometimes as ironical as a spiteful friend, made her see Baron Desforbes crossing the Boulevard Haussmann. Without doubt he was on his way to call upon her and ask for some lunch. She looked at the little gold watch in her bracelet, it was hardly twenty minutes past twelve. She would be home in plenty of time, and after her morning's delight it was an exquisite pleasure to her to lift up the blind a little as she passed her lover, who could not see her.

CHAPTER XII

CRUEL LOYALTY

WHEN René Vincy found himself at the gate of the museum without being able to rejoin Suzanne, a whirl of contradictory ideas assailed him so violently and suddenly that he hardly knew where he was. Suzanne's calculation was quite accurate, and the double blow she had dealt the young man paralysed all his powers of analysis and reflection. If she had simply told him that she loved him he would have without a doubt, in a supreme access of lucidity, perceived a very violent contrast between the angelic character affected by Suzanne and the abruptness of this declaration. He must have recognised that the angel's wings were very lightly attached to her shoulders to have been put in the cloak-room with such promptitude. But, far from removing her white wings, this angel had just unfurled them in all their glory and disappeared. "She loves me and will never forgive me for tearing the confession from her," René said to himself. He believed in all good faith that she had left him quite resolved never to see him again, and that idea absorbed all the living force of his mind. How was he to make rescind such a decision a creature so sincere that she had been unable to dissimulate her heart, and

so pious that she had at once reproached herself for the most involuntary of confessions as for a crime? The young man could see her again with fear painted on her face, with tears on her lashes. He walked straight before him, wrapped in thought, incapable at that moment of bearing the sight of a human being, even Emilie, his beloved confidant. He took a cab and was driven to the gates of Paris in the direction of Saint Cloud. He told the driver to go there instinctively, because Suzanne had described to him in the course of conversation two *fêtes* at which she had been present at the chateau in her youth. He felt a savage joy, once out of the cab, in going deep into the leafless wood. The dry leaves rustled beneath his feet. The cold blue sky of a February afternoon stretched above his head. At times he caught a glimpse, through the black tree trunks and bare limbs, of the melancholy ruins of the old chateau, and of the water of the lake upon which Madam Moraines had in days gone by seen pass in a boat the unhappy and noble prince, killed at the Cape. These wintry impressions, these memories of a tragic past, floated around the young man without distracting his reverie from the point which hypnotised him, so to speak; by what means was he to overcome the will of this woman by whom he was loved, whom he loved, and wished at all costs to meet again? What was he to do? To present himself at her house and force her door? To force himself upon her by haunting the drawing-rooms she frequented? Importune her by his presence at street corners and the theatre? All his delicacy rebelled

against conduct in which Suzanne could discover a single reason for loving him less. No, it was from herself he wished to obtain everything, even the right to gaze upon her! He had in his boyhood and the pure years of his early youth nourished his heart upon so many chimeras that he sincerely thought of making no further effort to approach her, and of obeying her, as Dante would have done his Beatrice, Petrarch his Laura, Cino de Pistoie his Sylvia, those proud poets in whom is expressed the noble conception, elaborated by the Middle Ages, of a pious and imaginative love, all renunciation and spirituality. Formerly he had tasted so much of the "Vie Nouvelle" and the sonnets of those dreamers to their dead ladies. How could this sublime and almost monarchical literature have prevailed against the venom of sensual love which Suzanne's beauty and luxury had instilled into his blood unknown to himself? Obey her? No, he could not. Plans whirled afresh through his mind, and he wore out his nerves by motion, the only remedy for that horrible suffering, the agony of unrest. Evening came on, with its short winter twilight. Then it was that René, exhausted by the excess of his emotion, came to the only decision it was possible for him to put into execution at once, to write to Suzanne. He reached the village of Saint Cloud, entered a *café*, and there upon a wretched writing-case, with a scratchy pen, to the accompaniment of the sounds of billiard-balls struck by the smokers of pipes, beneath the sly glance of a dirty waiter, he composed a first letter, then a second, and at last the third, filled with shame at

the paper he was using and the place he was in. It would have been quite unbearable to him for Suzanne to have seen him like this; but, on the other hand, he felt himself incapable of waiting till his return home to tell her what he had to say, and so in terms at which Baron Desforges would have been profoundly astonished if he had read them addressed to his Suzette of the Rue du Mont Thabor, he poured out the overflow of his anguish:

“ I have just written you several letters, madam, which I have torn up, and I do not know whether I shall send you this one, so indelicate does the fear of displeasing you make me consider the expression of sentiments which would not displease you if you could see them. Alas! hearts cannot be seen, and will you believe me when I tell you that the emotion which dictates this letter has nothing in it to offend the most delicate and purest of women, madam, even yourself. But you know me so little, and the sentiment you have allowed me to see, with the divine sincerity of a soul which feels a repugnance for all kinds of deceit, has been such a surprise that perhaps at the time I am writing these lines you have for ever banished, effaced and condemned it. Ah! if such be the case, do not answer this letter. Do not even read it. I shall know how to interpret your silence and accept your decision. I shall suffer cruelly, but with a gratitude to you which will never cease, gratitude for giving me in my life the absolute and complete joy of seeing the ideal of all my youth-

ful dreams move and live before me. For that, you see, when I ought to die of grief at meeting you and at once losing you, I shall never be sufficiently grateful. You have appeared to me, and by your existence alone have testified that this ideal did not lie! However hard my life may in the future be that dear, divine memory will follow me like a talisman, like a magic charm."

CHAPTER XIII

AT HOME

THE letter René posted in the pillar-box at Saint Cloud reached its destination. Suzanne had received it, with the rest of her correspondence, a few minutes before her husband entered the room, as usual, to have his cup of tea, and she was engaged in reading it when Paul's kind, loyal face appeared in the doorway. He called out to her, in his jolly, sonorous voice, "Good morning, Suzanne," and often added, "my fair rose." This allusion to Alfred de Musset's famous story never passed without a kiss. Musset represented to Moraines' youth and love with a dash of wickedness, and it was this good fellow's naïve fatuity to pose in his own eyes as treating Suzanne as a lover and not as a husband. He was one of those strange husbands who would willingly tell you in confidence, "I have told my wife everything, it is the only way to dispel her curiosity." Still, he was as much in love with his "fair rose" as he had been at first, and he proved it to her that morning by the way in which he kissed her, while she repulsed him with the words:

"Come, let me finish my letter and make the tea."

She knew very well that Paul would not ask her any details concerning her correspondence, and that gave her such a delightful sensation of warming herself at

the fire of the young man's phrases that she was not satisfied with reading the letter once; she re-read it, then folded it and put it inside her corsage. She had, as she took her place at the table, in front of the porcelain tea-cups, such a radiant look that Moraines said to her to tease her, raising his voice:

"If I were a jealous husband I should think you had received a letter from your lover, you look so pleased, madam. If you only knew how it suits you," he added, kissing her arm above the wrist, the golden-tinted skin of which was still fresh and perfumed from her bath.

"Ah, well, sir, you would be right," she replied with a malicious smile. It is a divine pleasure for women to utter with smiles like that truths which the listeners do not believe. They give themselves in that fashion a slight sensation of danger which delightfully quickens their pulses.

"Is your lover a nice fellow?" Paul went on, giving verve to what he judged to be a joke.

"Very nice."

"Is it possible to find out his name?"

"You are very curious. Search for it."

"No," Paul said, "it would be too hard a task. Ah! Suzanne," he added, with profound feeling, changing his tone all at once, "how cruel it would be to be distrustful! Imagine me jealous of you, and at my office with that idea gnawing at me all day? Bah!" he added cleverly, "I would get Desforges to watch you."

"It was very fortunate there was no one present to

hear his joke," Suzanne thought when she was alone. "He has a mania for saying such things in public." But René's letter had pleased her so much that she forgot to get angry, as she did when she found her husband too simple. Such pretty and clever evil-doers use this sort of logic: they use their utmost skill to put a bandage over the eyes with their white hands, then they reproach their victim for stumbling. It does not suffice for a person to be deceived, it must be only up to a certain point. Beyond that is too much; they are bored and angry over it in good faith. This one contented herself with a shrug of the shoulders and an expression of gentle pity. Then she drew the letter out from the place where she had hidden it and read it for the third time.

"It is true," she said aloud, "that he is not like the others."

She fell into a profound reverie, in which she saw the young man at the Louvre, as he had appeared beneath Veronese's great picture, his face turned to the right watching for her approach. When his eyes met hers, was he moved? Was he young? Later, when he told her that he loved her, how his lips trembled, those beautiful full lips she would have liked to kiss after her cheeks had been caressed by the supple golden beard which framed his fresh and virile face. But the fruit was not ripe. She had to wait. She uttered a sigh. She had calculated that the poet would write to her, during the day after their meeting, just such a letter as that. She had promised

herself she would not reply, not even to his second letter. She waited for this second letter for one, two and three days. Complete though her confidence in the ardour of the sentiment she had inspired in René was, she then began to be afraid when, on the afternoon of the third day, as her carriage turned the corner of the Rue Murillo, she saw him standing as before upon the pavement. She was very careful not to seem to notice him, and she assumed in her corner her most melancholy expression, her most dreamy look, and a purity of profile which would have moved a tiger. This comfortable carriage furnished with a host of useful nicknacks, was turned into a prison van bearing a victim—victim of her husband, her luxury, her love and her virtue. She was not very far from the truth, too, in passing the young man like that. At the sight of him, pale from three days of anguish, overwhelmed with emotion, she would so have liked to stop her swift-moving carriage, alight from it, or receive him into it and tell him, "But I love you as much as you do me." Instead of that she continued her drive and visits, sure now that the second letter would not be long in coming. She received it that very evening, but at a moment when its arrival formed a real danger. This was the reason of it. Returning home at once after the meeting René had feverishly written four pages, and in order that Madam Moraines might receive them more quickly, and with greater certainty, he had sent them at about five o'clock by hand, so that the letter was brought in by a footman when Suzanne had Desforges with her. He had come, as he often did at

that time, with a charming present—a delightful study in ancient gold discovered on a visit to the Hôtel Dreuot. She no sooner recognised the writing of the address than she said to herself, “The least sign of emotion and the Baron will guess I have a love affair.” As always happens, her fear of displaying her emotion made it more difficult for her to conceal her feelings. She took the envelope, looked at it like a person who could not guess from whom the letter came, tore it open and rapidly scanned the contents after first glancing at the signature; then, getting up to put it with others upon her desk:

“Another begging letter,” she said. “It is surprising how many I get nowadays. And you, Frederick, how do you manage?”

“It is quite simple,” the Baron replied. “Fifty francs at the first request, twenty at the second, and nothing at the third. My secretary has my instructions to do so. Charity is a stereotyped phrase in which I do not believe. As if it were for lack of money that the poor are poor. It is their character which has made them so, and you will not change that. For instance, the person who begs to-day, it is safe to wager, if inquiries were made, that he has had ten times in his life a fortune within his grasp, or else a competency. You constitute his capital, and the same thing will happen again in a few years’ time. I am willing to give elsewhere as much as you please. But as for thinking that money expended in that way is of the slightest use, that is another matter. Then, too, I know the benefactors male and female; I

know the advertisement and the assistance it is in Society, and the fine friendships—”

“Be quiet,” Suzanne said, “you are a frightful sceptic.” With the clever irony by which women, obliged to lie sometimes, revenge themselves upon the man who compels them to use deception, she added, “Ah! you are not the man to be easily imposed upon.”

The Baron smiled at his mistress's flattery. If his suspicions had been aroused that phrase would have removed them. The most artful men have one weak point where they can always be defeated—their vanity. But all sorts of suspicion was very far removed from Desforges' mind. It was as easy for Suzanne to deceive him as it had been for René to deceive his sister. Those who see us constantly are the last to notice things which would strike the first stranger. The fact is the stranger approaches without any already formed ideas, while our friends, whom we see every day, have formed an opinion of us which they no longer take the trouble to verify and modify. For this reason the Baron did not that day notice that his friend was in a state of intense agitation during a visit, which he prolonged more than usual. He told her all sorts of club gossip, while she moved about the room, under one pretext or another, giving sidelong glances at her letter, which she picked up with delight when Desforges had at last made up his mind to depart. “He is an excellent friend,” she said to herself, “but what a bore!” A fortnight's passion had sufficed to bring her to this state of in-

gratitude, and she soothed her impatience by absorbing phrase by phrase, word by word, the young man's mad letter. This time it was an ardent supplication, an appeal made to all her womanly tenderness. He no longer spoke to her of friendship. The feigned sadness in her carriage had borne fruit. "Since you love me," he told her, "have pity on yourself, if you have none for me." What would have appeared to Suzanne in anyone else intolerable fatuity, the absolute confidence in her own sentiment touched her deeply. She saw in it, and knew it was real, so complete an adoration that it did not admit of a shadow of doubt. It would have been so natural for René to have accused her of having played with him the cruel game of coquetry. How far such an hypothesis was from the young man's thoughts! "Poor boy," she said to herself, "how he loves me!" Thinking of Desforges by comparison, she added aloud, "It is the most certain way of not being deceived." She picked up the letter again. Its tone was so touching, it breathed such a perfume of sincere sorrow; on the other hand, the little drawing-room, with its cosy lights at six o'clock in the evening, brought back to her mind so clearly the recollection of the poet and his first visit that she asked herself if the test had not been sufficient. "No," she decided, "not yet." This foolish letter in fact only allowed of one answer: to tell René to come to her; but it was at his home she wished to see him again, in the little room he had described. She would arrive there in despair on the pretext of preventing him from

suicide. This excuse the third letter would surely provide, and she decided to wait for it, with what anticipation of joy at their next meeting. In the confusion of ideas which her sudden and unexpected presence would produce in René there would be no time for reflection. All those preliminaries so impossible, so odious to discuss with an inexperienced man like him, would be suppressed. There was, indeed, the presence in the same flat of the rest of his family. Suzanne would not have been the depraved woman she remained had not this detail added to her plan the charm of the twice-forbidden fruit. Yes, she was waiting for the third letter with consuming ardour. Her hours passed rapidly. She dined out, went to the theatre, paid her calls with this one thought alone. Her good luck arranged that Desforbes did not ask her that week for an appointment in the Rue du Mont Thabor. She did not conceal from herself that it was only a postponement. Even were she to become René's mistress, she would still have to be the mistress of the man who was responsible for a part of her luxury. She accepted the idea with no more repugnance than she did that of being Paul's wife. "What can that matter to you since I love you alone?" say to their lovers the women who are in the power of a husband or of a wealthy lover when they have to endure one of those grotesque scenes of jealousy in which are manifested the foolishness of the man who does not wish to share a woman's love with another. They are never more sincere than in uttering these words. They know so well that love has

nothing in common with duty, interest, or even with pleasure. But if this division of her love had nothing about it which wounded Suzanne she was none the less happy that it was postponed till later. She would be able to have a few happy days entirely consecrated to her new sentiment. In that still she was a courtesan, one of those creatures who become, when they fall in love, artists in love, as delicate upon certain points as they are abominably perverse in others.

“Provided he has not made up his mind to go away.”

- Such was the thought which came into her mind when she at last received the third letter she had so greatly desired, consisting of a long and heartrending farewell—without a reproach. She trembled lest René should have recourse to the step which Napoleon advised when with his imperial good sense he said, “In love the only victory is flight.” In acting as she had done she had risked her all. Would she win? Her anticipations were carried out with an exactness which delighted and at the same time frightened her. This third letter expressed such heartrending despair that with all her experience the clever comedienne felt herself, on reading it a second time, with a fresh fear, more terrible than the other, that René would really make an attempt upon his life. It was vain for her to reason with herself and point out that if the poet had meant to go away the letter would have mentioned the fact, or to maintain to herself that a handsome young man of twenty-five does not kill himself because of the silence of a woman by whom he believes himself to be loved. She was really the victim of extra-

ordinary anguish when she arrived about two o'clock in the afternoon at the entrance of the Rue Cœtlogon. She had received the letter that very morning. She stopped for a moment, however, surprised at this provincial corner of Paris, the picturesqueness of which had a few evenings before delighted Claude Larcher. The sky was cloudy as at the end of the winter, low and grey, and from it the bare branches stood out in melancholy fashion. The shouts of a few children at play were the only sounds to break the silence. The strangeness of this peaceful by-way, the unusual step Suzanne was hazarding, the uncertainty of the result, everything united to give her the most complete realisation of which she was capable. She had to smile when she told herself that she had no reason for thinking the young man was at home except that he was waiting without hope for an answer to his last letter. But when the porter replied to her question that M. René was at home, at the same time pointing out the door, she recovered her spirits. She had, like all very positive women, the strength of a man of action. A real idea of events made her resolute and bold in the carrying out of her plan. She rang the bell. Heavy steps sounded, and Françoise's face appeared. In any other circumstances she would have smiled at the astonishment which the country-woman made no effort to conceal. Colette Rigaud had once come to see the poet in haste to ask him to make a slight alteration in her part, and Françoise, after her first feeling of surprise had departed, without a doubt thought it was another visit of the same sort, for

Suzanne could hear her as she opened the door on the right say, "Monsieur René, there is a lady asking for you. A very beautiful lady—probably an artist." She saw the young man himself come out of the room and turn, as he recognised her, pale as death. Lightly she glided along the passage which the Raffet lithographs transformed into a little Napoleon museum. She entered the poet's room, while he stood back to let her pass. The door closed. They were alone.

"You! It is you!" René said. He gazed at her standing there, slender and elegant in the dark costume she had chosen for the visit. He was in that state of mental distraction caused by an unexpected event which suddenly transports one from the depths of despair to the opposite extreme. During those moments a whirl of ideas and sensations is let loose in us with such force that our mind becomes bewildered. The legs bend beneath the body, the hands tremble. It is happiness, and that is painful. René had to lean against the wall, his eyes still fixed upon the charming face he had despaired of ever seeing again. A detail completed his bewilderment. He noticed that Suzanne's hands also trembled slightly, and this time the tremor was sincere. The passionate caprice which the young woman had for the man was mingled with a fear of displeasing him. In penetrating into this room, where she was quite sure no woman had preceded her, the resolution to surrender herself to him was as clear and firm as resolves of the sort can be. Something unexpected always occurs to determine the man's attitude. There was, too, René's

naïveté to be overcome, and this pleased and terrified her at the same time. She hesitated for a moment directly she entered the room, while he was gazing at her; then, half-forgetting her reasoning and personality, she fell upon René's breast, her head resting upon his shoulder, and murmured:

"Ah! I have been too frightened. Your letter made me fear the worst, and I have come. I have struggled hard. My strength failed me. What will you think of me?"

He held her in his arms tremblingly. He raised her adorable head and began to give her kisses, first upon the eyes, those eyes whose sad expression had so pained him when he saw her in her carriage; afterwards, upon the cheeks, the ideal curve of which had so charmed him the first time they met; at last, upon the mouth, which opened so lovingly to him. What did he think of her? Could his soul form an idea, absorbed as it was by this union of lips? How delightful, too, these kisses seemed to Suzanne! Through the horrible complications of her female diplomacy a sincere desire had grown in her, that of meeting with young and spontaneous love, which was natural and vibrating. This love passed with René's breath into the depths of her being and made her half fainting. Ah, youth, how glorious is that complete surrender—absolute, without thought, without a word; oblivious of everything except the actual moment; effacement of everything except the sensation which will depart, but which is there, the sweetness of which our kiss tastes, the contour of which it outlines! This woman,

corrupted by the most disenchanting experiences, a love affair with a cynical Parisian of fifty, degraded by the worst venalities, which necessity does not excuse, this Machiavellian courtesan who had turned her love affair with René into a draught problem, for a second tasted the divine joy. The chastisement of those who commit the crime of calculation in love is that their calculation comes back to them at such moments. Overwhelmed as she was by the intoxication of this kiss, Suzanne had the sad courage to withdraw from the young man's arms with the words:

"Let me go. I have seen you. I know that you are alive. I beg of you, let me go. Oh! René!"—she had never called him by his Christian name before—"do not come near me!"

"Suzanne," ventured to reply the young man who had just drunk from that fine mouth the most burning kisses, the certainty of being loved, "have no fear of me. When shall we have an hour together like this? It is I who beg you to stay. See," he added graciously, going further away from her, "I am obeying you. I obeyed you when it was such cruelty to myself. Ah! you believe me!" he said, as he saw that Madam Moraines' features had not the same expression of fear upon them. "Will you be good?" he went on in that childish way which pleases women so, and which tells all of them, from great lady to flower-girl, that a man is a darling. "Sit down there upon the couch where I have sat so often at my work, and then be good too, and do not look as if you are a visitor." He approached her to make her sit down, and he took

away her muff; he unfastened her cloak. She let him do so with a sad smile, that of a person who yields. This smile was the Madonna's agony, the last act in the comedy of the ideal she had played. He took off her hat, too, and gazed at her with that adoration which a woman can be always sure of provoking in her lover if she gives him one of those proofs of love which flatter at the same time a man's love and fatuity, the lofty and debased passions of the heart. The poet said to himself, "She must love me to have come here, for I know her to be so pure, so religious and attached to her duties." All the lies she had carefully told him came back to his mind as additional reasons for believing in her sincerity, and he said to her, "How happy I am to have you here now! Do not fear anything, we are so much alone! My sister has gone out for the whole of the afternoon, and the servant is busy elsewhere. But I have you. See, this is my own little domain, this room is the refuge where I have spent so much of my life! Not one of these objects, not one of these corners which could not tell you what I have suffered during the last few days. My poor books"—he pointed to the low bookcase—"I have given up opening. My dear pictures I have ceased to look at. The pen with which I wrote to you I have not again touched. I was there, just in the place you are now occupying, counting the hours indefinitely. What a week I have spent! But what does it matter now you have come, now I can look at you? A sorrow which I can tell to you becomes at once happiness."

She listened to him, half closing her eyes given up to the music of these words, without the profound pleasure which invaded her preventing her from carrying out her plan. The emotion of the danger prevents an adroit fencer from remembering in the heat of battle the lessons learned in the school of arms. The assurance he had given her of their solitude had made her quiver with joy; the glance cast over this little room, so carefully tidied and tended, had delighted her as a sign that she was not mistaken upon the subject of Rene's past. It all betokened a studious and lonely life, the pure and noble life of the artist who envelops himself in an atmosphere of beautiful dreams. But more than all it was the young man who pleased her with his burning eyes, his coaxing way of approach, and she realised that this pathway of reciprocal confidences upon their common sufferings ought to lead to her object without her running the risk of diminishing her prestige.

"As for me," she answered, "do you think I have not suffered too? Why deny it? Your letters. I did not want to read them. I remained for a whole day with the first one in my pocket lacking the strength to destroy it, but without opening the envelope. To read it was like listening to you again, and I had so resolutely determined not to do so. I had so earnestly prayed my guardian angel for strength to forget you. Ah! how I struggled!" Here the Madonna appeared for the last time. She lifted her eyes to heaven, represented under the circumstances by a ceiling from which the poet had

suspended little Japanese dolls. There passed into those beautiful eyes the shadow of the wings of that guardian angel she had dared to mention, disappearing in the distance. Then she fixed her blue eyes upon René again, and with all the resignation of a vanquished heart said to him:

"I am lost now, but what does it matter? I love you too dearly. I know nothing now, except that I cannot bear to see you unhappy."

Convulsive sobs shook her, and again her head drooped upon the young man's shoulder, while he began to shower kisses upon her face. Quite childishly she put her arms round his neck and leant her breast upon his, so that she could feel the beating of his heart. She saw pass into René's eyes that fever of love which leads the most timid and respectful to the height of audacity. She said again, "Ah! leave me," and got up to escape the arms which encircled her, but this time she drew back in the direction of the couch. He pursued her, and pressing her to him he felt her supple body against his own.

CHAPTER XIV

DAYS OF HAPPINESS

WHEN Suzanne left the Rue Cœtlogon, the little silent flat, the door of which René insisted upon opening for her himself, to spare her Françoise's disapproving look, their next appointment was already made. On reaching the little street, although prudence told her to hasten away without delay, as she did from the Rue du Mont Thabor, she turned her head. She saw René standing behind the curtain of the window which opened into the garden. The charm of her romance had so taken possession of this soul, usually prudent to coldness, that she gave a smile and wave of the hand to the poet who was watching her departure in the dusk, from the room where her triumph had been consummated, for all her calculations had turned out correct. While riding in a cab from the station to the corner of the Rue d'Assas, and while walking towards the Bon Marché, where she had ordered her carriage to meet her, the different details of her conversation came back to her mind, and in reviewing them she applauded herself for the way in which she had conducted it. From the time a woman is a man's mistress discussions upon the way of meeting again become as easy and delightful as they were

before odious and difficult. Just then was a disenchantment, a recall to reality. After possession those talks become a proof of love, because they envelop a promise of happiness. In the quarter of an hour that followed their ardent kisses, and after the comedy of false shame which accompanied them, during those moments of her return to her usual composure, Suzanne had begun the attack and said to her lover:

"I must have a promise from you. If you do not want me to reproach myself with my love for you as with a crime, swear to me not to go into Society for my sake. You must work, and you do not know what that life is. That magnificent talent, genius, you will squander in futility, and misery, and I shall be the cause of it. Yes, promise me that you will not visit anywhere." In a low voice: "None of those women who hovered round you the other evening."

How lovingly René had kissed her after this phrase, in which the artist could see homage paid to his future work, and the lover the delicate expression of secret jealousy! He had answered with a timid:

"Not even visit you?"

"Particularly me," she had said. "Now I should not be able to bear to see you shake hands with my husband. You must understand me," she added, as she curled the young man's hair with a caressing gesture. He was upon the floor at her feet, and she was again sitting upon the couch. She leaned forward her face and hid it in René's shoulder. "Ah!" she sighed, "do not make me say more." Then, after a few moments: "What I should like to be to you is a

friend who only enters into the life of the man she loves to bring him joy and courage, love and nobility, the friend who loves and is loved in mystery, outside that mocking world which withers the holiest religions of the soul. It is so great a fault that I have committed"—this time she hid her face in her pretty hands—"that it must not become a series of basenesses and villainies like those which have so horrified me in other people. Spare me it, my René, if you love me as you say you do. But do you really love me so?"

As she uttered this elegant string of untruths she had been able to watch the delight appear upon the face of her romantic and naïve accomplice, whom such beauty of sentiment sent into an ecstasy. She replaced upon her brow the Madonna's halo she had taken off for love's sake. In this way, mingling cunning with love, and the calculations of the most precise positivism with the most subtle sensibility, she had led him to accept, as alone worthy of the poesy of their love, the following arrangement. He would take, in a false name and in a neighbourhood not very far from the Rue Murillo, a little furnished flat, so that they might meet there two, three or four times a week. She had suggested Les Batignolles to him, but she had done it so cleverly as to make him think the idea was his own, as also the previous one. He would make inquiries the following day, and would write to her at a particular *poste restante* in certain initials. This excess of useless precautions showed René in what servitude his poor angel lived—if it could be called living. "Poor angel," he had in fact

said to himself as she stifled a complaint about the despotism of her husband, comparing herself to a hunted animal, "how you must have suffered!" She had raised once again her eyes towards the ceiling, till only the whites of them were visible, with one of those movements so well acted that years afterwards the man who has been touched by this pantomime is still asking himself, "Was she not sincere?"

This perfect comedy was not needed to make René gladly fall in with the plan proposed by Desforges' clever pupil. In principle, and simply because he loved her, he would have accepted any plan with gratitude and emotion. But the programme outlined by Suzanne corresponded with all the artificial parts of her being. The clandestine character of this intrigue enchanted the reader of novels, who was delighted in anticipation at the idea of such a mystery having a place in her life. The phraseology in which the young woman had posed as the Deity presiding over his work had flattered in him the egoism of the author who dreams of conciliating art with love, and pleasure with the solitude and independence necessary for composition. At last the poet, after long days of torture, felt as if he were winged both in mind and heart. Such was the ardour of his happiness that he did not even notice the look of pained astonishment which his sister's face bore for the whole evening after Suzanne's visit. What had Françoise heard? What had she told Madam Fresneau? Whatever it was the latter suffered visibly. The profound ignorance of some women who are at once romantic and

pure reserves such surprises for them. They are interested in love because they are women, and they lend a hand at the beginning of relations which they believe are, like themselves, innocent. Afterwards, when they perceive the brutal consequences in which these relations almost of necessity end, their surprise would be comic if it were not as cruel as it is respectable. From the servant's description Emilie had no doubt as to the identity of the visitor, and the other clues Françoise furnished—the sound of kisses she had overheard, the duration of the visit, the untidiness of the couch, and René's excited looks—with one of those instincts which even the most honourable women possess in such circumstances, led her to think that Madam Moraines had there been René's mistress. The mother of the family, the pious housewife, revolted at the thought, at the same time she remembered the bitter tears she had lately seen upon Rosalie's pale cheeks. Thinking of the young girl, whose great love for René she had perceived, and the great unknown lady whom his *navette* had so attracted, she came to ask herself, "Has René been mistaken concerning this woman?" But she was a sister too—kind even to weakness—and she had not the strength to make the least observation to her brother on the subject, seeing that he was so happy. She had been too greatly consumed with anxiety at his despair during the last week. This mixture of opposite sentiments prevented her from provoking any fresh confidences, and on his part possession rendered René discreet, as sometimes happens through the excess of

love into which it throws a man. He could no longer talk of Suzanne. His feelings for her were not now capable of expression in words. He found almost at once, in the quiet, middle-class Rue des Dames, in the midst of the Batignolles quarter suggested by Suzanne, the little flat he desired. Very shortly two circumstances made him free to see Suzanne alone. Before she had been his mistress a week Claude Larcher, the only one of his colleagues he saw much of, left Paris. René, who had lately neglected him, saw him arrive at the Rue Cœtlogon about half-past six in the evening in travelling dress, pale and distraught, with an expression of disaster on his face. They were just sitting down to dinner.

"I have just time to shake hands with you," Claude said without sitting down. "I catch the express for Mont Cenis at nine o'clock, and I must dine at the station."

"Shall you be away long?" Emilie asked.

"Who knows?" said Claude.

"What a lucky fellow you are," Fresneau cried, "to be able to read Virgil in his own land instead of making fools translate him."

"Very lucky, to be sure!" said, with an enervated laugh, the author, who, when accompanied by René to the street where his cab was waiting with his luggage, burst into tears. "Ah! that Colette," he said, "You remember when you came to the Rue de Varenne? How pretty she was that day! She joked me on the subject of women. Well, to-day it is of a woman I am ashamed to say I am jealous, a monster

with whom she is intimately connected and who has not left her for some days — an Aline Raymond, a worthless creature, well known throughout Paris as such. Her name even bears an evil taste in my mouth when I pronounce it. I have not been able to endure it, so I am going away. I had no money, you can guess, so I went to a money-lender and had to pay sixty per cent. for a loan. Now I shall put that in my next comedy. After all, I managed to raise six thousand francs. When the train carries me off each revolution of the wheels will pass over my heart; but I shall flee from her, and when she learns that I have gone, from a letter I shall write her from Milan, what a revenge it will be for me! Good-bye, René, you will not see me again till I am cured of my mad passion."

Since then he had received no news of his unhappy friend of whom René particularly thought in comparing the woman he idolised, and who was so worthy of his cult, with the dangerous, ferocious actress. Claude's absence was an excuse for his non-appearance in the green-room at the Théâtre Français. Why should he expose himself to the volleys of abuse which she no doubt showered upon her absent lover when she mentioned him? Thanks to this same absence, every bond between the poet and the society into which Laréner had introduced him was broken. Under the influence of his new-born passion for Suzanne the author of *Sigisbée* had neglected even the most elementary duties of politeness. Not only had he not left cards with the ladies who had so kindly invited

him, but he had not even called upon the Countess. The latter, a great enough, and, at the same time, kind enough lady to understand the irregular nature of artists and to forgive them for their eccentricities, had said to herself, "He was bored," and she had not given him another invitation. She was, besides, engaged at the moment in imposing upon her friends a spiritualistic Russian pianist who pretended to be in direct communication with the soul of Chopin. René, who was free in this direction, had still the chance that Madam Offarel might be offended because Emilie and himself had not assisted at the famous dinner, which took a week and many journeys around Paris to prepare. Fresneau had gone alone.

"What a fine errand you sent me on," he said to his wife on his return. "When I mentioned your headache old Offarel uttered an 'Ah!' which quite unnerved me. When I also said that René was away at the bedside of a sick friend—what a funny excuse, in parenthesis, but let that pass—she asked me, 'Is it at a mansion?' At table poor Claude was the theme of conversation. They dissected him to the utmost possible extent. He is an egoist, he has bad manners, he has ruined his health, he has no future, and so on. If I had not played piquet with old Offarel! He beat me again, the old rascal. Ah! Passart was there again. Remind me to recommend him to your uncle for the Saint André school. He is a charming fellow. Between ourselves, I believe Rosalie has a fancy for him."

Emilie had to smile at her husband's surprising

perspicacity. She had formerly heard Madam Offarel complaining of the attentions of the young drawing-master, and she realised that he had been invited at the last moment to prove that, failing René, there were other suitors at hand. Then the Offarel ladies spent a fortnight without visiting the Rue Cœtlogon, though they rarely let four days pass without putting in an appearance after dinner. When they made up their minds to resume their visits at the usual time after their fortnight's absence they came in with Passart as their escort, a big, fair, clumsy fellow with spectacles, a timid expression and a face covered with freckles. Emilie did not take long to find out the motive for this joint-visit. It was meant to make her jealous, for the old lady betrayed her simple manoeuvre when she said:

"M. Offarel was busy this evening, and M. Passart has kindly consented to act as our escort. Come, Rosalie, make room for M. Jacques near you."

Poor Rosalie had not met René face to face for a considerable time. She was very emotional and trembling, for her heart had pained her during the walk from the Rue de Bagneux to the Rue Cœtlogon, and that short distance had seemed interminable to her. Still, she had the strength to cast a glance in the direction of her old sweetheart, as if to bear witness that she was in no way responsible for her mother's petty schemes, and the courage also to reply, as she sat down in a cofner and put another chair in front of her:

"I want this chair to put my wool upon. M. Passart would not deprive me of it."

"Here is a vacant place," Emilie interrupted, making the young man sit down near her and also coming to the brave girl's assistance. The latter, though she knew perfectly well that a frightful scene awaited her when she got home, obstinately refused to play the part for which she had been brought. It would have been so natural for spite to have inspired her with the idea of this petty revenge. But really delicate women, who know how to love, do not suffer from spite. To make jealous the man who has deserted them horrifies them, because it necessitates their flirtation with someone else, and they cannot bear the idea. What a divine proof of love this scrupulous fidelity is, and how it engraves a woman for ever in a man's regrets. For ever; but when it is a question of the present hour and the immediate result these sublime lovers are on the wrong track and the coquettes are right. When years have sped, and the aged lover passes his memories in review, he will understand by comparison the unique value of the woman who would not make him suffer, even to recapture him. Meantime he runs after the wretches who pour out for him the bitter philtre of that degrading, bewitching jealousy. It is correct to say, in Ren 's defence, that in sacrificing Rosalie for Suzanne he at least thought he was making the sacrifice to real love. The next morning, when his sister lauded to him the nobility of the young girl's attitude, it was quite sincerely that he used in reply

this expression, bearing the imprint of the most naïve fatuity:

"What a pity such a beautiful sentiment is lost."

"Yes," Emilie repeated with a sigh, "what a pity."

The tone in which the phrase was uttered would have sufficed to enlighten the poet as to the sudden change of opinion which had taken place in his sister regarding Madam Moraines if his mind had been at liberty to think of anything besides his love. But this love absorbed him entirely. Now to him the days separated themselves into two groups: those when he met Suzanne, and those he spent without seeing her. The latter, which were much the more numerous, were usually passed in this fashion; he lay in bed late in the morning to dream. He experienced that decrease of animal energy, the inevitable consequence of excesses of sensual love. He took great pains over his toilette, a circumstance which reveals to women of experience that a young man is loved. His dressing completed, he wrote to his Madonna. She had imposed upon him the pleasant task of keeping for her a journal of his thoughts. On his part he had not a line of her writing. She had told him, "I am watched so closely, and never alone," and he pitied her as he performed the task Suzanne had set him. Why? He had never asked himself the question. This position of sentimental narcissus, ceaselessly engaged in admiring himself in his own love, suited so well the vanity there was in him, as in almost every author. Suzanne had not sufficiently reflected upon the anomalies of the literary man's nature to have specu-

lated upon this vanity. René's diary pleased her, for she read it when he was not present, as a glowing memory simply of the caresses given and received. When the poet had thus completed his morning prayer to his divinity it was lunch time. Directly afterwards he went to the library in the Rue de Richelieu to conscientiously take notes for the *Savonarole* upon which he was engaged. He worked there without intermission for the rest of the afternoon and part of the evening. He toiled without ever feeling, as in the days of *Sigisbée*, that plenitude of talent which from the brain passed into the pen, so much so that words fixed themselves in the memory, pictures appeared with the contours and colours of reality, characters came and went, and the effort of writing was transformed into a slight intoxication from which he emerged in a state of exhaustion; but what a delightful fatigue it was! René required to prepare the scenes for his real drama, an almost painful tension of his whole thoughts, and a worse tension to put into verse the fragments he had as a preliminary sketched out in prose. His inspiration no longer awakened in happy fire. For that there was several reasons of a very different character: the waste of vital sap which a reciprocated passion entails—a moral reason; his constant thoughts of Suzanne and his inability to ever entirely forget her—an intellectual one; the last and most powerful of all: the poet was suffering, without realising it, from the influence of success, which is so murderous even to the greatest geniuses. In imagining and in writing he began to think of the

public. He saw in his mind's eye the theatre on the night of the first performance; the journalists in their stalls, the Society folk here and there, and at the front of a box, Madam Moraines. He heard beforehand the noise of the applause, as demoralising to dramatic authors as multiplicity of editions can be to novelists. The vision of a certain effect to be produced took the place in him of that disinterested and natural view of the object to be painted, for the pleasure of depicting it, which is the necessary condition for the work of living art. Too young, still, to possess that manual skill by the aid of which veterans of literature succeed in writing passionate phrases without any emotion, in a fashion that will deceive the cleverest of critics, René sought in himself a spring, an outpouring of ideas which he did not find. His drama was not constructed in his mind, as it naturally needed to have been. The tragic figures of the Florentine monk with a goat's face, of the terrible Pontiff, Alexander VI., of the violent Michael Angelo, of sorrowful Machiavelli, and of terrible Cæsar Borgia, did not come to life before his eyes in spite of the documents he had collected, the notes he had made, and the pages he had erased. Then he laid down his pen; he watched the sky turn blue through the guipure of the curtains at his window; he listened to the noises of the house: a door closing, Constant playing, Françoise grumbling, Emilie's light footsteps and Fresneau's heavy ones, and he began to count the number of hours which separated him from his next meeting with his mistress.

" Ah! How I love her! How I love her! " he said

to himself, exciting his passion by the ardour with which he uttered aloud that phrase. Then he delighted in recalling the furnished flat where this rendezvous to which he was looking forward with such feverish impatience would take place. In his search he experienced greater good fortune than his inexperience led Suzanne to anticipate. The flat consisted of three rooms, coquettishly furnished by the efforts of Madam Malvina Raulet, a dark lady of about thirty-five, whose discreet manners, plain dress, soft voice and pleasant eyes had at once enchanted René. Madam Malvina Raulet made out she was a widow. She officially lived upon the small income left her by her late husband, a chimerical person whose profession she defined by the vague phrase, "He was in business." In reality the clever landlady of furnished apartments had never been married. She was at the moment maintained by a serious man, a doctor of the district, the father of a family, whom she had wheedled by her distinguished manner, and no doubt by her seductive ways, into allowing her three hundred francs a month, paid on the first of the month and in a regular way like an official's salary. As she was before everything a business woman she thought to increase her income by detaching from her flat, which was much too large for her, three rooms, one of which could serve as a drawing-room, another as a bedroom, and the third as a dressing-room. The existence of two doors upon the landing allowed her to allot to these three rooms a private entrance. The almost elegant furniture she placed there came to her as a

most mournful legacy. She had been for ten years of her life the mistress of a madman, paid by the family, who had not desired his madness to be made known. At the poor fellow's death Malvina had received 20,000 francs, which she had been promised beforehand, and kept all the furniture of the house which was the scene of her strange position. The sinister and hideous secrets of this existence would never be known to René. But in vast Paris, so full of clandestine intrigues, how many of the handsome young men who go to a rendezvous at such a place take notice of the history of the person who provides them with a well-prepared refuge for their love? The poet hardly suspected that at a glance this person, so irreproachable in her attitude, had clearly seen his intentions. He had said that he resided at Versailles and was obliged to come to Paris two or three times a week. In childish fashion he had chosen as his name that of the hero of the novel which had delighted him most in his youth, the paradoxical D'Albert of *Mademoiselle de Maupin*. While writing this name at the foot of the agreement Madam Raulet made him sign, he had placed on the table his hat, in the crown of which the clever hostess could read her new tenant's real initials, and she went on:

"M. D'Albert, would you like my servant to wait upon you? That will be fifty francs more a month."

The exorbitant price was asked in so candid a tone, and on the other hand Madam Raulet appeared to him so respectable, that the young man dared not bargain. He looked at her, however, with his first feeling of

distrust. Her appearance gave the lie to any idea of her exploitation of adultery. She wore a dark dress, well cut but quite simple. Her watch in her waist-belt was attached to one of those chains around her neck, which used to be so fashionable among the French middle-classes, and which certainly came to her from a beloved mother. A brooch enclosing under glass a lock of white hair, that of a dear father, no, doubt, fastened up her modest neck. Her long fingers were clad in silk mittens, through which her gold wedding ring showed. It is only right to add that this distinguished widow had, besides the doctor, two very young lovers: one a law student, the other an *employé* at a large fancy store, who believed that in her he possessed a Society lady watched over by an implacable family. These two lovers, in balancing her expenditure, represented all sorts of little economies: restaurant dinners, carriage drives, presents of jewellery, boxes at the theatre, but this did not prevent the virtuous creature saying to the sham D'Albert:

"The house is very quiet, sir. You are a young man," she added, with a smile, "you will not be offended if I take the liberty of mentioning that the least noise upon the staircase in the evening, for example, would be a reason for bringing our agreement to an end."

René felt himself blushing when she said that. In his excess of simplicity he trembled for fear the honourable widow would give him notice after the first rendezvous. This ridiculous fear led him, after Suzanne had ended her first visit, to pay his hostess a visit, making the excuse of a little suggestion regarding

the service. She received him with the gracious politeness of a woman who knows nothing, understands nothing, and has seen nothing, though through the window she had followed Madam Moraines with her eyes. The latter's gait along the pavement was that regarding which a Parisian eye never makes a mistake. Malvina from that moment knew how matters stood; her tenant was the lover of a Society woman of the most aristocratic circles. He, however, although well groomed, had neither in his hair, nor the cut of his beard, nor in his walk, the something which denotes the aristocracy. The landlady thought that in all probability the rent would be paid by the mistress and not by the lover, and she regretted she had only asked five hundred francs a month besides the fifty for service. Her entire flat cost her fourteen hundred francs a year, and the servant received wages of forty-five francs. Never mind, she would make it up in extras; wood for the fire, washing, meals—if the young man ever dared to lunch there, as she had suggested to him.

"She is an excellent woman, and very obliging," René told Suzanne when she asked him about Madam Raulet. Was not the poet's confidence right? What would have been the use of indulging, as Claude would have done, in a pessimistic analysis of this woman's character unless to conjure up a thousand imaginary dangers of blackmail? For if Malvina was something of a venal and cunning procuress by nature, she was also a woman who craved for respectability, and who proposed, once she had made her pile,

to return to her birthplace, Tournon, and there lead a life of irreproachable decency. The possible slander of a law case in which her name would have been introduced sufficed to drive out of her mind any scheme of violent knavery. She pushed her cult of respectability to such lengths that she herself invented, for the porter's benefit, a complicated story of her tenant. Suzanne and René became a happy couple, living all the year round in the country, and slightly related to the defunct Raulet. She it was, too, who, without being asked, handed two keys to the so-called D'Albert, so as to prevent him having any dealings, however insignificant, with this porter. What did the real cause of her complaisance matter to René? Young folk have a convenient way of not arguing over facts which suit their passions. They thus embark upon perilous paths, but at least they pluck and smell all the flowers. When the young man crossed Paris to go to the flat in the Rue des Dames a song echoed in his heart, which drowned suspicion's depressing voice. Their meetings almost always took place in the morning. René had never inquired why that part of the day was more convenient to Suzanne. In reality it was the time she was more certain of escaping Desforges' surveillance. Before mid-day the Baron devoted himself to his most precious possession—his health. He took a fencing lesson, and had a gallop in the Bois, which he called his "open-air cure." The double-faced Madonna, who was so well acquainted with this man, knew, too, that he was as fettered by his hygiene as Paul was by his office.

She felt a mischievous pleasure in picturing to herself her husband sitting at his desk, her "dear friend" riding his English mare, and her little René entering a florist's to purchase the adornment for the chapel of their caresses. He usually selected roses, red as his friend's lips, pale as her cheeks when weary, living, fresh roses whose scent perfumed their kisses. She knew, while she was going towards this tender, furtive nest, that her young lover was standing at the window listening to the noise of the passing cabs. How happy would he be when hers stopped in front of the house! She would ascend the staircase and he would be waiting, having himself softly opened the door, so as not to lose a single second of her dear presence. He would press her to him, devouring her with those silent kisses which seek the freshness of the skin and the mobility of the lips through the lace veil. The young woman's great seductiveness and her supreme cleverness consisted in retaining her expression of innocence in spite of everything. Her pure face seemed to be ignorant of the complaisance of the rest of her person, and by the aid of this ideality of face she had been able, without declining in his estimation, to complete René's amorous education, as if she were discovering with him the mysterious world of the life of the senses. This sensual love formed the sincere foundation of her relations with the young man. The same love was the cause of the frequency of their meetings, to which the strange creature brought an absolutely happy soul and one entirely free from any feeling of remorse. She belonged, without doubt by heredity, being the

daughter of a statesman, to the great race of creatures of action, whose dominant trait is the distributive faculty, if that expression is permissible. These beings have the power of exploiting to the full the present hour, without either the past or future troubling or arresting their sensations. Suzanne had organised the part of her life belonging to Paul and the part belonging to Desforges. Now at times she belonged to René entirely, with a suspension of the rest of her existence so absolute that she would have needed to reason with herself to find out she was lying. She allowed herself to be adored by her lover like an idol, voluptuously cradled in a flood of kisses which rose towards her—love kisses which were not counted and weighed like Desforges—new kisses which had not the well-worn monotony of Paul's—kisses as ardent as the man of twenty-five who lavished them upon her—fresh kisses which came to her from a mouth as pure as her own, and which accompanied words of love borrowed from the most delightful poetry—in short, the exquisite regalia of the *blasé* courtesan from whom an effort was required to break loose! About mid-day she got ready to go, and René acted as her maid, watching her with adoration in his eyes as she arranged her hair. With her beautiful arms uplifted, her waist, in its tiny black satin corset appeared to the greatest advantage. Her soft and perfumed silk skirt, which was a little short, showed stockings moulded to the shape of her fine legs. He approached her, and his mouth traversed her bare shoulders, making them tremble before they disappeared beneath her corsage. Then,

when she had gone, after being served with lunch in the drawing-room by Madam Raulet, he stayed there all day with the avowed object of working—for he had brought a case full of papers—in reality to feast on his memories in those rooms! He did not go till the twilight came, traversing, in order to reach the Rue Cœtlogon, the whole of Paris, studded with its gas jets, • which looked so bright in the transparent evening atmosphere, and the divine lassitude he felt was like a suprême pleasure in which was summed up and merged all others.

CHAPTER XV

COLETTE'S HATRED

FOR about two months this life lasted, so sweet in its monotony, without any other events than the regret for the last kiss and hope for the coming ones, when one morning, at the very moment René was setting out for the rendezvous, Françoise handed him a letter, the handwriting of which made him tremble. He recognised Claude Larcher's pen. Then he read the following:

“VENICE, DARIO PALACE.
“*April* 1879.

“I am writing to you from your Venice, my dear René, that Venice from which you evoked the cruel face of your Coelia and the tender face of your Beatrice; and as fairy Venice is still the home of the unexpected, the city of Undines, who, upon this shore of the Orient, are called sirens, I have found here furnished rooms in the most delightful little palace, upon the Great Canal, like Lord Byron, a ‘palazzino’ with marble medallions upon its front, adorned, worked, carved and leaning on one side, like myself on my bad days. While I am scribbling you this letter I have the clear water of the Grand Canal beneath my windows,

and around me the peace of this city—the Cora Pearl of the Adriatic a song-writer would call it!—where the silence is that of a dream. Ah! old friend, why did I have to bring here the heart of a literary man, old and wounded, the uneasy heart I can hear beat and groan still more loudly in this sweet silence? Do you know it is two o'clock; I have just lunched at a little table at the Florian, beneath the arcades, in order to go to San-Giorgio in Bragora to look at a divine Cima, while I have to dine this evening with two descendants of the Doges, beautiful as the women of Veronese, and Russiaps as amusing as the Korazoff of our friend Beyle, and instead of being in high spirits I have come back to look at her portrait, the portrait of Colette! René, René, would that I were sitting in my stall at the Français watching her act!

“ But still I did not sit down to write you that, before my balcony, through the rails of which I can see the gondolas pass. They glide, incline and turn, so coquettish in their melancholy slenderness! If every one of these floating coffins bore one of my dead dreams, what an interminable procession it would be upon the dismal stream! Why am I not an etcher? I know very well what a mournful picture I should engrave: a flight of these black barks in the twilight, with white skeletons as gondoliers at the prow and poop, rowing straight ahead past a row of ruined palaces, and I would write beneath it: ‘ My heart is thus!’ After a youth more down-trodden than the grapes in the wine-press, and so miserable, when I had just escaped from the slavery of business, the horrible

servitude of that love crossed my path. of that love based upon hatred and contempt! Why, O righteous God! why? Who could have told, on the July evening when this folly commenced, that I was at one of the most solemn hours of my life? I had worked all day and dined alone. I had gone out for a breath of air; I lounged along with my stick and spleen, looking at the passers-by, without any other object than to make it ten o'clock. What invisible demon directed my footsteps to the Comédie? Why did I go into the green-room, where I had not been for months, to have a chat with old Farquet, whom I prized as much as my first article? Why did I display my cleverness there and my most brilliant fancies, I who often at fashionable dinners was as mute as the fish on the menu? Why was Colette there in that delightful, old-fashioned girl's costume? She was playing Rosine in the *Barbier*. I went into the theatre to hear her sing. Why did she look at me while she was singing, so visibly moved that I dared not understand? Why had she that mouth, those eyes, that profile, that face in which one seems to be able to read the grief of an enslaved Psyche tortured by the senses? How I loved her from that first evening, and how she loved me! She did not dispute her love, though it was but the second time we had met. Understand that I was fool enough to hope for fidelity from a girl who had thrown herself at my head in such a fashion! 'Come into my dressing-room?' she said when I appeared in the wings, and I went. We had not been there more than a quarter of an hour before she pressed her lips

to mine, with that almost painful wildness which I have always seen in pleasure. 'Ah!' she told me, 'this is an hour I have so desired!' Madman! I should have taken her for what she was, an admirable courtesan, and remembered that women act exactly the same with others as they do with oneself. But let us leave that subject and come to the facts which I owe you, since you have written to me on several occasions so kindly. When I left you in the Rue Cœtlogon, to start for Italy, I wished to find out if I could do without her. Ah, well, the test has been made and failed. I cannot. I have reasoned with myself and struggled. I have got up since my departure, not ten times but twenty, thirty times, swearing to myself that I will not think of her during the day. That is all right for a quarter or half an hour. But at the end of that time I can see her again, her eyes, mouth, and then the gestures which belong to her alone, a tender and submissive way she has of leaning her head upon me when I hold her in my arms; and then, wherever I am, I have to stop and lean against a wall, so strong is the feeling I have of a fine sharp needle being turned in my heart. Would you believe that I had to leave Florence because I spent my time at the services before Botticelli's picture, the 'Madonna Incovenata,' the photograph of which you have seen at my rooms? I happened to take a carriage to one of the suburbs of the city, to arrive in time to see this picture again, because the angel on the right, the one who lifts the veil, is like her, with the same look, that look which has made me so often pity her and weep over her

misery, when I ought to have killed her. Then I left Florence and went to Pisa, the dead city, the taciturn pleasures of which I had already tasted. It had delighted me so, this place where stood the dome, baptistery and the campanile, with a cemetery wall and the *débris* of an embattled rampart to enclose it! And the Gambo shore at two o'clock, sterile and sandy amid the pines! The yellow Arno with its slow and steady stream! My room looked out upon this melancholy stream, but it was full of sunlight, warm and clear, and I had come there fortified by a great project. The old maxim of that Goethe who was formerly so much admired had come back to me: 'Poesy is deliverance.' 'Let me try,' I said, and I promised myself that I would not leave Pisa until I had transformed my grief into literature. In making soap bubbles with my old tears perhaps I should forget to shed others. These soap bubbles swelled into a story I called *Analyse*. But you have doubtless read it in the *Revue Parisienne*. I have done nothing better, have I? I have put, as you can see, the whole of my sad love into it; everything there is photographically exact, from the story of the letter to my jealousy of Sappho. Is not Colette, too, drawn from life? And myself? Alas, my poor friend, to soil thus the picture of the woman I have loved so dearly, to drag in the mire the idol which was formerly adorned with the freshest roses, to dishonour my cherished past with all the strength of my heart, if I had at least gained peace! Here is the result of that noble effort: I had no sooner put the MSS. of that little story in the post

than I went back to write to Colette and ask her forgiveness. Ah! the method of Goethe, of that sublime Philistine, of that Jupiter, according to formula, what an excellent joke! Yes. I have buried my pen in my wound, so as to take my blood instead of ink, and I have only succeeded in poisoning the wound all the more. If I am ever cured it will only be by time. But after all, why cure myself?

"Yes, why? I have been proud; I am no longer. I have fought against the passion which debased me, but I am struggling no more. If I had a cancer upon my cheek, should I be ashamed of it? I have a cancer in my soul, that is all, and I am now allowing myself to be devoured by it without resistance. Listen to the rest of my story. Colette did not answer my letter. Could I, after my conduct, expect her to have said 'thank you'? I had begun to degrade myself by writing to her. I went on. I then experienced an unheard-of pleasure, one I did not expect: that of degrading myself before her, of putting beneath her feet all my dignity as a man and artist. I wrote to her a second, third and fourth time. My story appeared; I wrote to her again, letters in which I appeared intoxicated with humiliation; letters she could show to Salvanev, to the shameless Aline, and say to them: 'He has left me, he insults me, see how he adores me!' Should not that insult have proved to her the extent of my love for her? But still, you do not know her, René; you do not know, with all her faults, how proud she is. What this miserable story must have been to her I dare not think, and that is the

reason I never dare return. In the state of wounded sensibility in which I am, to face a scene like those of the past is not possible to me; and to live without Colette any longer is beyond the remnant of my strength. I have therefore taken the step of writing to you, my dear René, to ask you to undertake a mission for me to her. I know you have always pleased her, and she is really grateful to you for the fine part you have written for her; I know she will believe you when you say 'Claude is dying. Have pity on him.' Tell her too, René, that she has no longer my bad temper to fear. The Larcher in revolt she was unable to bear has ceased to exist. To be near her, to live in her shadow, to have her near me, I would tolerate everything, you understand, everything. In truth, the months of this winter have been a time of bitter sorrow. What a paradise by the side of this inferno: absence! Then we had divine hours, afternoons spent in love, in her flat in the Rue de Rivoli, which looks out upon the garden of the Tuileries. Life murmured around us, and I pressed my dear mistress to my heart. I had her eyes, her mouth, and that sorrowful and passionate caress she alone knew how to bestow. See, my writing changes merely at the thought of it. If I have been a friend to you in the past, as you told me, do me the supreme service of going to see her, show her this letter, speak to her, soften her. Let her give me permission to return to her and forgive me. Good-bye. I shall await your reply in agony, and you know the possibilities there are of self-torture in your old friend,

C. L.

"P.S.—Go to the office of the *Revue* and get, in my name, five copies of my story, which I can place here."

"It is just like him!" René said to himself after reading this strange letter in which were collected, as if tied up in a bundle, the divers elements which formed Claude's composite personality: the taste for the artificial, sentimentalism in the face of the most bitter suffering, and yet a childish sincerity, the most susceptible author's vanity and most ingenuous sacrifice of all pretension, the power of self-knowledge, and the powerlessness to direct himself. "I will go to the Français this evening, if Colette is acting," René said to himself. He bought a paper and discovered that she was really appearing. "But," he went on, "how will she receive me?" He was so preoccupied with the chances of his reception, and also with his old friend's grief, that when he reached the rendezvous he could not help telling Suzanne his anxiety. He made her read the letter, which she returned to him with the remark:

"Poor devil!" And she added, as if by chance, "Have you really never talked about me together?"

"Yes, once by chance," René replied after some slight hesitation. Since he had been Suzanne's lover the scruples of his discretion made him look upon as an indelicacy the simple phrase he had pronounced in his visit to Claude, the unfortunate phrase which had drawn his friend's sarcastic exclamation. Suzanne was mistaken as to the meaning of his hesitation and insisted:

" I am sure he spoke ill of me to you? "

" No, he did not," René replied with conviction. He was too used to the expressions of Suzanne's face not to notice the look of anxiety her clear eyes had displayed as she asked this second question, and he in turn asked:

" Why do you distrust him so? "

" Why? " she replied with a smile, " because I love you so. My René, men are so wicked." Then, so as to entirely destroy the effect her excessive distrust might have produced upon the young man, " You know," she went on, " you must go and see *Made-moiselle Rigaud*."

" That is my intention," he said, " this evening. And you? " he asked, as he often did, " what are you doing to-night? "

" I am going to the theatre too," she replied; " but not in the wings. My husband is taking me to the *Gymnase*—just the two of us. Why do you make me think of that? I shall have enough sadness when I am there. Oh, my love," she added, as she clasped him in her arms, " you ought to love me very dearly now to make up for the time you are not with me! "

The poet's head was still full of the sound of her voice, sweet as the most beautiful music, and his soul troubled by her kisses, more intoxicating than the oldest wines, when at about nine o'clock in the evening he entered the stage door of the *Théâtre Français*, by which access is obtained to the famous green-room. He cast a glance at the door-keeper's box, remembering that spot had been one of Claude's greatest thorns

in the flesh. In the past, when they went to the theatre together, the latter hardly ever failed to tell his young friend, as he pointed out to him the rack reserved for Colette's letters:

"If I were to steal them, perhaps I should find out the truth."

"What happiness," René thought, "not to suffer from that horrible malady of jealousy!" He smiled as he ascended the staircase, the wall of which is adorned with portraits of actors and actresses of the last century. He came to the door over which the name of Mademoiselle Rigaud was written. He tapped gently, but had to knock more loudly before he was invited to enter.

The door opened into a little ante-room, and René, raising the black satin portière, found himself in a tiny dressing-room, in which were five gentlemen, two of them in evening dress, while Colette was engaged at her toilet table in making up her face. She could see him enter in the large mirror in the wall at the back of her dressing-table. She recognised the author of *Sigisbée*, and half turning, to show that her hands were covered with vaseline and thus excuse herself from shaking hands, she cast a glance which made René understand how well advised Claude was not to return without permission.

"Good evening," she said. "Without laying myself open to reproach I might have thought you were dead. I see by your face that you have merely been too happy. I am acting in your play to-morrow, you know. Sit down if you can find room." Before René

could say a word in reply she had turned to Salvaney, who was one of the five gentlemen. "After all, I will do so. Come for me at mid-day. Aline will be there, and we three will lunch together before the visit."

She threw a second glance in René's direction after she had spoken. The corners of her mouth drooped; her charming face suddenly assumed a most implacable expression of cruelty. That phrase was a defiance hurled at Claude through his dearest friend. The friend would certainly repeat it to the jealous lover. It was just as if she had shouted through space to the man she did not forget, in spite of his flight and insults, "You are not present, and I am amusing myself in the way which will make you suffer most." She exchanged a few words with one of the other visitors, recommending to his notice a poor devil in whom she was interested, insisting upon another putting a laudatory notice of her in his paper, and returned to Salvaney to ask him about the chances of the horses in the next big race, till at last, when she had wiped her hands, she got up and said:

"Now, friends, you are very nice, but"—she pointed to the door—"I am going to dress and you must depart. No, not you," she went on, addressing René, without taking the trouble to conceal the fact from the others, "I have a word or two to say to you." When they were left alone, still sitting in front of her mirror, she went on: "Have you read Claude's infamous book?"

"No," René said, "but I have received a letter from him. He is the unhappiest of men."

" Ah! You have not read it! " Colette interrupted. " Ah, well! read it. You will see what a beast you have for your friend! Ah! " she cried, turning to René, folding her arms, with the flames of anger shooting from eyes which gleamed in her white face, " do you think it right to insult a woman? Besides, what have I done to the gentleman? Because I would not obey like a dog his caprices, break with all my friends and lead the life of a slave! Was I his wife by any chance? Did he keep me? Did I call him to account for his actions? Even had I done him an injury, was that any reason for him to publish broadcast the obscenities he has imagined about me! He is a beast. You can write to him for me, and tell him the day I meet him I will spit in his face. Ah! The gentleman has treated me as a hussy and a courtesan! He shall find out the hussy! She will take her revenge! No *Mélanie*, " she said to the dresser who came in, " in a quarter of an hour. I will call you. "

" But if he did not love you, " René replied, taking advantage of the respite, " he would not inveigh against you. It is suffering which maddens him. "

" Don't make such silly remarks to me, " Colette went on with a shrug of the shoulders, still engaged with her make-up in front of the mirror. " You still believe, then, in the heart of that creature! But he is not even your friend. If you had heard him sneer at your love affairs you would know what sort of fellow he was. "

" My love affairs? " René asked in surprise.

" Come, " the actress said, with an evil laugh, " do

not finesse with me; and when you want a confidant choose some one a little more reliable than M. Larcher, your friend."

"I do not understand you," the young man answered with beating heart. "I never confided in him."

"Then he must have invented the fact that you were in love with Madam Moraines, the pretty fair woman, old Desforages' mistress? That completes it in my eyes," the cruel actress went on, with cutting irony, as a woman can whose self-respect has been sorely wounded. The unhappy Claude, who forgot in his moment of love what he thought of Colette in his lucid moments, had simply said, the day following René's visit: "You know poor Vincy has fallen in love." "With whom?" she had asked. He had named Madam Moraines to her, and Colette already knew her story, thanks to her acquaintance with the *demi-monde*. When she had alluded to René's love affair with Suzanne, the actress, who could no longer contain herself, had spoken almost haphazard, to discredit his friend in his own eyes. Seeing the effect her phrase produced upon the latter she insisted. Hurting the man she had there, whose features she could see change with suffering, was assuaging a little her hatred of the other, since she knew how dear friends Paul and the poet were.

"Claude did not tell you that!" René cried, losing control of himself; "and if he were present he would stop you from slandering a woman whom he knows to be worthy of all your respect." *

"Of all my respect!" Colette went on, laughing •

more loudly and nervously. "Do you take me for someone else, Vincy? Because she has a husband to conceal her infamy and spend the old man's money with her, is that the reason? All my respect! Because she is more expensive than the girl at the street corner who has not the price of her dinner. So you believe it of fashionable ladies, do you? Then you know," she stormed, getting up and advancing towards René in her fury, "if it annoys you to hear that your mistress⁹ is Desforges', go and ask Claude the truth. It will furnish that fine gentleman with copy. Ah! you are beginning to have the same opinion of him that I have. Without malice, my dear fellow, you must be careful in that quarter. Of all my respect! Ah!—no, that is a little too good. Well, good-bye. This time I am really going to dress. Mélanie!" she cried, opening the door, "Mélanie! Salute Claude for me," she added as a final sarcasm, "and tell him that people only jest with Colette about love now. At this allusion to the piece of which Larcher spoke in his letter with such mad exaltation, she pushed René out of the dressing-room and shut the door, though her laugh still sounded mocking, implacable and metallic, a laugh which contained a bit of everything—theatrical effect, satisfied hate, a courtesan's mockery and the vengeance of the wounded mistress.

CHAPTER XVI

THE STORY OF A SUSPICION

"WHAT a wicked woman!" René repeated as he descended the staircase of the theatre, which was re-echoing with the shouts of the call-boy. His legs trembled beneath him and he asked himself, "Why has she a grudge against me?" without realising that for a quarter of an hour he had represented Claude in Colette's eyes. Perhaps the joy of the actress in piercing his heart was derived from the spite which our friend's mistresses often have for us when they find we will not make love to them. The fidelity of man to man is one of the sentiments which wound women most deeply. "What have I done to her?" the poet went on, and he was unable to answer that question, and also incapable of collecting his thoughts. Some phrases which fall upon our minds without preparation stun us, just as does a heavy blow upon the head. It is a momentary stupor, a sudden cessation, even of suffering. René only came to himself when he had reached the Place du Palais-Royal, which was swarming with carriages. His first feeling was a burst of furious rage against Claude. "What an unworthy friend!" he said to himself. "How can he have betrayed my secret to such a woman? What a secret! What

did he know of it? A blush on my cheek, a little hesitation in pronouncing a name. That is enough for him to dishonour a woman whom he hardly knows to a hussy whose infamy he has spread broadcast." The memory of the conversation in which Larcher might have guessed his feelings for Suzanne came back to him in minute detail. He saw himself in the flat at the Rue de Varenne, the proofs upon the couch, and Claude's face made still more livid by the windows. He saw the laugh which contracted his face while his ironical mouth uttered these words: "Ah! You are not in love!" He also saw the hesitation which had hovered about that mouth when he, René, had asked: "Then do you know anything about her?" The same wave of memory brought back to his mind other pictures associated with that one. He could hear Suzanne's voice saying during their third talk: "Your friend M. Larcher and myself I am sure are not in sympathy." Again, that morning, had she not formulated that distrust? Yes, she had only too good a reason to distrust him. If he had only accused her of an intrigue with him—René! But the other abominable insinuation, that she was kept by Desforges, he had dared to bring it forward! The thing that rendered this idea intolerable to the poet was not that he had the least shadow of suspicion against his divine mistress, but, he felt that Colette had not lied in pretending to attribute this infamous accusation to Larcher. For Larcher to have repeated it he must have heard it from some other mouth. Now, if Suzanne insisted, as she had done twice, on him telling her how

Larcher spoke of her it was because she knew herself to be the victim of this terrible calumny! René saw in his mind the Desforgés whom he had met once at her house, an old beau of military appearance, with grey hair and a red, withered face. And the woman! He pictured her as she had been that morning, so blonde, white, fine, with her pure blue eyes, and with that delicacy of her whole being which gave an almost ideal character to the most passionate kisses. That was the woman who was soiled by such a slander! "The world is too horrible!" René said aloud, "and as for Claude!" He had for the latter such real affection, yet it was his dearest friend who had spoken against Suzanne in this ignoble fashion, like a blackguard and a traitor. What a contrast to the poor angel insulted in that fashion, who, knowing him, had found no other vengeance than to say: "I have forgiven him!" All the other times she had named Claude it had been to praise his talent, to pity him for his faults! Suddenly René recalled his innocent madonna's other phrase: "He has no right to take his revenge upon other women by making love to them haphazard. I almost had to be angry with him one day when he sat next to me at dinner." "That is the reason!" the young man told himself with a return of anger; "he made love to her, she repulsed him, and now he slanders her. It is too disgusting!"

René had walked, while a victim of those cruel reflections, as far as the Place de l'Opéra, and then mechanically turned to the right, going up the boulevard almost without noticing where he was going.

Bitterness and disgust were so profoundly repugnant to this pure soul that these sensations soon dissolved into an infinite tenderness for the woman he loved so dearly and admired, who had been so badly treated by the treacherous Claude and vindictive Colette. What was she doing at that very time? She was there in a box at the Gymnase, forced by her husband to assist at a performance while overcome by a melancholy of which their love was the cause, and engaged in thinking of their kisses. He had no sooner evoked her adorable face than an instinctive and irresistible need to see her took possession of him. He stopped a passing cab, telling the driver the name of the theatre without even reflecting. How many times had he been thus tempted, when he knew Suzanne was spending the evening at some public place, to go there himself! He had always repelled the temptation from a scruple against doing anything in her absence which was contrary to what he had promised to do in her presence. Besides, the nature of his imagination was strangely delighted at this absolute scission between the two Suzannes, that of Society and his own, and above all he feared to meet Paul Moraines. He had read *Fanny*, and he feared equally with death the frightful jealousy described in that beautiful story. An analytical writer, like Claude, would have discovered a motive for seeking such a meeting with the husband so as to obtain a fresh heart-wound upon which to fix his microscope. Poets, in whom poetry has turned neither to corruption nor acting, possess an instinct which makes them avoid dishonouring

experiences. They respect in themselves the beauty of the sentiment. While the cab proceeded in the direction of the Boulevard Bonne-Nouvelle all this collection of motives to which René had formerly scrupulously yielded came back to his mind. But he had been touched by Colette's phrases more deeply than he desired, than he could admit. One hideous vision had passed before his eyes. It might return, he felt, without formulating the thought, and he knew that Suzanne's presence was the most certain guarantee against its return. Lovers undergo these irrational impulses, an effect in their hearts of the instinct of preservation our sentiments, like beings, possess. The cab rolled on its way, and René pleaded the cause of his disobedience to the conventions agreed with his friend as to the way he spent his evenings. "But if she knew what I had to hear, would she not be the first to cry to me, 'Come, and read my love upon my face'? Then I shall see her but for a quarter of an hour and I will go away washed from the stain. But the husband?—I shall have to meet him sooner or later, and as he is nothing to her!—" Madam Moraines had not failed to make use to her favoured admirer of the unlikely untruth of all married mistresses which is sometimes a truth—so impossible is the creature woman to understand—as the divorce records show. René found, in the thought of the delicacy Suzanne had shown in thus anticipating his most unconfessed and least legitimate jealousies, one more pretext for cursing the slanderers of this sublime creature. "That woman Desforges' mistress! Why?

For money? What foolishness! She, the daughter of a minister and the wife of a business man! That Claude! How could he?"

This tumult of ideas was appeased by the necessity of action when the young man found himself at the door of the Gymnase. He would not have Suzanne see him for anything. So he remained standing for a few moments on the steps reflecting. The act had just ended, for the audience were crowding out. This circumstance supplied the poet with a very simple ruse for seeing his mistress without being seen: to go in and find out the position of Suzanne's box, and then purchase a seat from which a good view of it could be obtained without there being any risk of his being seen. As he entered the theatre he had a momentary shock at meeting one of the smart people who had been at Madam Komof's, the young Marquis de Hère, who passed, wearing in his buttonhole, as his custom was, a lily of the valley with fern, swinging his cane, and humming the air from the *Cloches*, which was still in the fashion, so low that he could hardly hear it himself. He brushed against René with his elbow, without recognising him or seeming to do so, any more than Salvaney had done in Colette's dressing-room. The poet did not have to make a long search through the house, for Madam Moraines was in the third box, almost facing him. She was there alone in the front of the box. Two men were at the back; a young one standing, a fine fellow with a big moustache and a sunburnt complexion, who was without a doubt her husband. The other was seated. Why had chance

—it could only be chance—led into that box, on that precise evening, the man regarding whom the abominable Colette had slandered Suzanne? Yes, it was actually Desforbes who was sitting on the chair behind Madam Moraines. The poet had no difficulty in recognising the Baron's energetic profile, his clear brown eyes in an almost inflamed face, his forehead with its frame of white hair and his fair moustache. But why, at the sight of the old beau talking familiarly to Suzanne, who had turned half round and was fanning herself, while Moraines scanned the boxes with his glasses, did René feel so bad that he quickly withdrew? For the first time since he had enjoyed the pleasure of seeing the young woman, fair and slender in her red dress, at the entrance of the drawing-room at Madam Komof's, suspicion entered his mind.

What suspicion? Had he been obliged to put it into words he could not have done so. Yet when Suzanne had told him that very morning of her evening at the Gymnase she had said: "I am going *tête-à-tête* with my husband." What motive had induced her thus to ignore the truth? Certainly the detail was of no importance. But a lie, small or great, is always a lie. After all, perhaps, Desforbes found his way to the box between the acts. This explanation was so natural, even peremptory, that René adopted it at once. Besides, he would verify it without further delay. He returned to the box-office and took one of the orchestra stalls at the back on the left. He had calculated that from that spot he would have the best chance of watching the Moraines' box unobserved. The house filled

once more and the curtain rose. Desforbes did not leave the box. He remained in the same seat, leaning towards Suzanne and chatting with her. Why not? Could not his presence be explained in a thousand ways without Suzanne having lied in not mentioning it? Why should not Moraines have invited him without his wife's knowledge? He was talking familiarly to the latter, and she was replying in the same tone. But had not he, René, met him at her house? A man of the world chats during the performance to a woman of the world. Does that prove that an ignoble *liaison*, both adulterous and pecuniary, exists between them? The poet argued in this way, and the argument would have seemed irrefutable had he caught a glimpse on Madam Moraines' face of but one of those periods of melancholy he expected to find there. On the contrary, in her elegant black lace evening dress, she appeared perfectly happy, without anything on her mind. She had such an open way of laughing at the jokes in the play, the gaiety in her eyes was so frank, so infectious, when she exchanged her reflections with one or other of the two cavaliers; she crunched at intervals the iced fruits from the box in front of her with such enjoyment that it was impossible to suspect that she had undertaken that morning a pilgrimage to the shrine of her most secret and profound love! The emotion of the pilgrimage had left so little trace upon this face, now beaming with frivolity, that René could hardly believe his own eyes. He had expected to find her very different. Nor did the husband, with jovial cordiality written on

his face, bear any closer resemblance to the obscure, suspicious and retired man the credulous lover after his mistress's confidences had pictured. The poor fellow had come to seek at the theatre definite appeasement from the trouble which Colette's speech had caused him. When he returned to the Rue Cœtlogon his anxiety had increased. It has often been said that we should not keep many friends if we could listen to them talking in our absence. It is worse still to surprise the woman we love in her natural state. René had the experience, but he was too passionately in love with Suzanne to surrender to this first vision of his madonna's duplicity.

"She was," he said to himself when he awoke the next morning and thought over his painful experience, "in such a good humour last evening. Must I be egoistic enough to reproach her with it? Baron Desforges was in her box when she told me she was going with her husband alone. She will explain to me when I see her next. Her husband does not look the sort of man she pretends he is. But faces are very deceptive! Claude Larcher took me in badly with his friendly gestures, open countenance, his way of doing me favours and appearing to forget about them! Then that ignoble treachery!" All the cruelty of the impressions he had felt the previous evening were transformed again into a still more furious hatred of the man who had been, by his culpable chattering, the first cause of this chagrin. In the excess of his injustice René misunderstood the most unquestionable qualities of the friend who had been

his protector: absolute disinterestedness, the kindness of devoting himself without personal return, and the entire absence of literary jealousy. He did not even do Claude the justice of admitting that the latter had spoken to Colette lightly, imprudently, but without any intention of treachery. Suzanne's lover could not remain the friend of a man who had permitted himself to say against her what Larcher had said. René repeated that all day. Once back from the library, where he had found work almost impossible, he sat down at his table to write to that felon one of those letters which are never effaced. When he had finished the letter he read it through. In it he defended Madam Moraines in terms which proclaimed his love, and now more than ever he wished Claude was not in possession of his secret.

"What is the use of writing to him?" he concluded; "when he comes back I will tell him my opinion of him. It will be more dignified."

He was preparing to tear up the dangerous letter when Emilie came in, as her custom was before dinner, to ask her brother how his work was progressing. She read, with her woman's natural curiosity, the address written on the envelope and she asked:

"What, is Claude at Venice? So you have news of him!"

"Never mention his name in my presence," René replied as he tore up the letter with a sort of frigid rage.

"Have you quarrelled?" Madam Fresneau asked, for she had a feeling of gratitude to Larcher.

"For ever," René replied. "Do not ask me the reason. He is the most treacherous of friends."

Emilie did not insist. She was not mistaken in her brother's tones. He suffered, and his hatred of Larcher was profound; but as he was silent to his sister of the cause of this hatred, it was obvious that the difference between the two friends was not upon literary matters. By one of those intuitions which passionate love always finds at its service, Emilie guessed that the two writers had quarrelled over the fault of the woman whose name René never mentioned in her presence, the Madam Moraines she had now begun to hate for the same reason she had first of all loved her so. She had seen for the last few weeks her brother's cheeks pale, his eyes black-ringed, and the pallor of lassitude spread over his dear face. Although profoundly honourable, she was too clever not to attribute this fatigue to its real cause. She thought of it while she re-copied the fragments of *Savonarole*, as she had done those of *Sigisbée*; and although she felt a blind admiration for the most insignificant page coming from René's pen, all kinds of signs bore witness to her of the difference of inspiration between the two works, from the number of verses written at each sitting to the continual remodelling of the scenes and the writing which had lost something of its nervous firmness. The spring of fresh, broad poetry from which *Sigisbée* had flowed now seemed exhausted. What had changed in René's existence? A woman had come into his life. It was therefore to this woman's influence that Emilie attributed the

momentous weakening in the poet's faculties. She went further, even to the extent of wishing the terrible unknown to share Rosalie's sorrow. By a mirage of the memory, familiar to souls of excessive sensitiveness, she forgot what part she herself had taken in breaking off her brother's love affair with Rosalie, how she had seen the poor girl for him, told her his decision, and made an effort to comfort her when she was sobbing as if her heart would break. It was upon Madame Moraines the blame of it all fell, and to-day that same woman had been the cause of René's quarrel with his best and most devoted friend, the one his sister preferred because she had measured the efficacy of his friendship.

"But how did it happen," she thought, "since Claude is away?"

She set her ingenuity to work to solve the problem while going about her household duties: making Constant repeat his lessons, verifying Fresneau's accounts, and examining button by button and fold by fold her brother's linen. The latter was shut in his room, where everything brought back to his mind Suzanne's unique and adorable visit, while he awaited with feverish impatience the day of their next rendezvous. He was suffering from the deadly effect of slander once listened to, which is something like poison. A person comes and goes, and only knows he is sick by a vague and grievous inquietude. Yet the virus ferments in the blood and bursts out into formidable outbreaks. Really, the young man did not believe in the shameful accusations brought by Colette against

Suzanne; but through considering them, in order to refute them, he had become accustomed to them, just as if he were stocking his mind. At the moment Colette had spoken he had not even discussed such infamy. He began to consider it, clinging to the marks of sincerity Suzanne had given him, in order to prevent himself falling into the abyss of doubt and dishonouring jealousy. What would he become if at this desired meeting he acquired the undeniable proof that her sincerity was not as he believed? He had come to the little flat in the Rue des Dames with an expression of care on his face which did not escape Suzanne. But to her loving, "What is the matter?" he made the excuse of an unjust criticism in a newspaper. Then he felt almost ashamed of that innocent excuse, so kindly had his mistress replied:

"You great baby, if you were not envied you would not be successful."

"Let us talk of yourself," he had replied with beating heart. "What have you been doing since I last saw you?"

If Suzanne had watched him at that moment she would have seen with what anguish he asked the question. It was a trap, though a simple and innocent one. In three days suspicion had led this enthusiastic lover to the verge of distrust. But Suzanne was in exactly the same position as regards him as Desforges was with her. She could not believe that René would act contrary to the character she knew he possessed. How could she imagine that this child was entering upon a contest of wits with her?

"What have I done?" she replied. "First of all, the other evening, I went to the Gymnase with my husband. Fortunately we have not much to say to one another now. I was able to think of you all the evening, as if I were alone, and able to regret you. To be with him is to be so lonely. You talk of the sorrows of your artist's life; if you only knew those of my life as a Society woman and the melancholy of those pleasure jaunts and *tête-à-têtes*!"

"Then you were bored at the theatre?" René insisted.

"You were not there," she said with a smile and looked at him. "What is the matter, my love?" Never had she seen René with such a bitter, almost hard look upon his face.

"It is still that childish anger against the article," René replied.

"Was it so spiteful then? Where did it appear?" she went on, put on her guard by her mistress's instinct, and as the poet thus unexpectedly questioned stammered, "It is not worth the trouble of you reading it," she had no further doubt; he had something against her. A question rose to her lips. "Has anyone told you something bad of me?" Her profound diplomatic spirit corrected her first impulse. Was there not half an admission in all anticipated distrust? The true innocents are ignorant. She must find out what René himself had done since the other day, and what people he had seen able to talk about her.

"Have you been to see Mademoiselle Rigaud?" she asked in unconcerned fashion.

"Yes," René replied, not knowing how to hide the embarrassment which the question caused him.

"Does she forgive poor Claude?" Suzanne went on.

"No," he said; and added, "She is a very wicked woman," in so bitter a tone that Madame Moraines suddenly guessed a part of the truth. The actress had certainly spoken about her to René. Again she was seized with a desire to provoke his confidences. She thought that the surest way of reaching this end was to intoxicate her lover with pleasure. She knew how powerless a man is to resist the wave of emotion caresses pour into his heart. She closed René's mouth with a long kiss. She could see the flame of love pass into his eyes, of that which leads to the madness of the senses, there to drink oblivion of suspicion. From the silent ardour with which he returned her kiss Suzanne could understand still more that René had suffered with a suffering in which his thoughts of her were mingled. There was in the fury of this caress a little of that bitter anger which revives passion by excluding love. When the conversation was resumed, Suzanne, in her most gentle voice, the tone most likely to insinuate itself right into the depths of that heart she had always known to be so open, said:

"What chagrin have you suffered that you do not tell me?"

Ah! if she had uttered that phrase at the beginning of their talk he would not have had the strength to keep silent. He would have repeated his conversation

with Colette, punctuated with tears and kisses. Alas! at that moment he did not suffer from that interview. That which caused him frightful suffering, and entered into his heart like a dagger's point, was the fact that he had caught her, his idol, in the act of uttering an untruth. Yes, she had lied to him; this time there was no doubt about it. She had affirmed to him that she had gone to the theatre *tête-à-tête* with her husband, and it was false; that she had been sad there, which was also false. To this interrogation, displaying such tender solicitude, could he reply with those two formal, precise and irrefutable accusations? He did not feel he had the strength to do so, so he overcame his embarrassment by repeating his previous reply. Suzanne looked at him and his eyes turned to her. She simply sighed: "Poor René!" and as the time of separation drew near she could not push her inquiry further.

"He will tell me everything the next time I see him," she thought as she went away. In spite of this reflection the idea tormented her. She loved the young man with real affection, though a very different one from that which she manifested in words. She adored in him above everything the physical lover; but so corrupted was she by her life and her environment, or perhaps because of that very corruption, the poet's nobility of soul did not leave her indifferent. Besides, would not the sensual delights of this love cease on the day that was broken the circle of illusions she had traced around her? Someone had tried to break this magic circle. That someone could only be Colette.

Everything seemed to point to it. But, on the other hand, what reason had the actress to pursue her with her hatred—she, Suzanne, whom she did not know, even by name? Colette was Claude's mistress. Madam Moraines found herself face to face with the man whom she had distrusted from the first. For Colette to have spoken about her to René, Claude must have talked about her to Colette. Here the young woman's ideas became confused. Larcher had never seen her with René. The latter, she knew from his own evidence, which she did not doubt, had never taken his friend into his confidence.

"I am upon the wrong scent," Suzanne came to the conclusion. It was all in vain she argued. She could not convince herself that her lover was sad because of the supposed newspaper notice. A danger threatened her heart's intrigue. She felt it. That sensation was increased by what her husband said the day after she had noticed René's inexplicable sorrow. Seven o'clock had just struck. Suzanne was alone in the little drawing-room where she had first begun to entangle the young man in toils as fine and supple as those with which the spider envelops the fly entangled in his web. She had received more callers than usual, with Desforges amongst them, and he had just left. Paul Moraines appeared, noisy as usual, with gaiety depicted on his face, and taking her by the waist—she had got up nervously at his brusque entrance:

"A kiss," he said, kissing her, "two kisses," as he kissed her again, "to recompense me for being wise.

Yes," he replied to Suzanne's look of interrogation, "that call I owed Madam Komof for so long. I have just come from it. Whom do you think I met there? Guess? René Vincy, the young poet, and I cannot understand why Desforges looks upon him as an affected fellow. He is charming. He just suits me. We had a long chat. I told him you would be pleased to see him again. Was I right? "

"Oh, yes," Suzanne replied. "Whom did you see at the Countess's? "

While her husband furnished her with a list of familiar names, she thought: "René went to Madam Komof's. Why?" From the commencement of their mysterious relations that was his first step into Society. He had so often repeated to his mistress: "I only want yourself and my work." Yet that visit, so far outside his programme of life for months, he had concealed from her, whereas it was her loving custom to let him know beforehand of her slightest movements. He had met Paul, who must have demonstrated to him what he was—the exact opposite of what his wife represented him to be. She had a feeling of ill-temper take possession of her against the good fellow who had committed the great fault of calling upon the Countess the same day as the poet, and she said to him, almost sharply:

"I am sure you have not written to Crucé for the Alençon."

"Yes, I have written," Moraines replied with an air of triumph, "and you shall have it." That referred to old lace, of which the collector, a sort of clandestine

courtier of all smart people, had spoken to Suzanne, while now the latter wished to make her husband give it to her. From time to time she asked him for some gift which she could show, while she could tell its origin to her dearest friends in words such as these: "Paul is so good to me. Look at the present he gave me the other day." She forgot to add that the money for the present usually came from Desforges, in an indirect way, it is true. Although the Baron was only mixed up in business to the extent demanded by the proper management of his own wealth, he often came across opportunities of speculating in certainties, and these he was kind enough to allow Moraines to profit by. In this way recently the Northern Railway Company, of which Desforges was a director, had purchased a line of local interest, reputed to be bankrupt. Paul had been able, having the information in time, to realise by the sudden rise of the stock of this company a profit of thirty thousand francs, part of which would pay for the precious lace. This little financial operation had even produced, on the rebound, a strange enough scene between the young woman and René. She had asked him at one of their meetings how much *Sigisbée* had brought him in, and she added:

"How have you invested all that money?"

"I do not know," René had said with a laugh. "My sister has bought me bonds with the first thousand francs, and the rest I have kept in my drawer."

"Will you let me talk to you like a sister as well?" she had replied. "We have a friend who is a director of the Northern Railway Company, and he has given

us some valuable information. Will you give me your promise of secrecy?" She had explained to him about the purchase of the shares. "Give an order to-morrow," she concluded. "You will make as much money as you please."

"Be quiet!" the poet had retorted, closing her mouth with his hand. "I know you talk to me like this out of love, but I cannot allow you to give me advice of this sort. I should lose my self-esteem."

He had been so sincere as he spoke that Suzanne had not dared to insist. His delicacy had seemed to her somewhat ridiculous. But had he not been like it, would he have pleased her as he did? It was, too, his youthfulness of soul she feared. If he was ever enlightened as to the real secrets of her life, how that noble heart, too incapable of compounding with honour ever to forgive her, would revolt against her! He had received his warning. In thinking of the various signs of danger she had gathered one by one—René's sadness, his anger against Colette Rigaud, his reticence and his sudden re-entry into Society—Suzanne said to herself: "I was wrong not to force an explanation at once." So when she entered the flat in the Rue des Dames a few days later her mind was very clearly made up not to commit the same mistake a second time. She saw at the first glance that the young man was still more troubled and melancholy, but she did not pretend to notice it nor the coldness with which he received her kiss of greeting. She accompanied with a sad smile her words:

"I have a reproach to make you, René; why did

you not tell me you were going to pay the Countess a visit? I would have arranged in such a way as to have avoided a meeting which must have been painful to you? ”

“ Painful? ” René replied with an irony which she did not recognise in him; “ but M. Moraines was charming to me.”

“ Yes,” she went on, “ you completed his conquest. He, usually so sarcastic, talked to me of you with an enthusiasm which was quite painful. Did he not ask you to call? You can be quite proud. It is very rarely that he gives a fresh face a good reception. Poor René,” she went on, leaning her two hands upon her lover’s shoulder and placing her head sideways upon her two hands, “ how you must have suffered from his amiability! ”

“ Yes, I have suffered severely,” René replied in an indistinct voice. He looked at the loving face so near his own. He remembered what she had said at the Louvre before the portrait of Giorgione’s mistress: “ Lie with so pure a face! ” Still, she had lied to him. What proof had he that she was not always lying? He had, while a victim of the tortures of distrust, since his meeting with Paul, been subject to the attacks of terrible hypotheses. The contrast between the reception Moraines had given him and Suzanne’s picture of her tyrannical husband had been too great. “ Why did she deceive me on that point as well? ” René asked himself; he had gone to Madam Komof’s without any precise object, but with the secret hope at the bottom of his heart that he would hear

Suzanne discussed by the people of her own set. They at least ought to know her. Alas! His chat with Moraines had sufficed to plunge him once more into the depths of uncertainty. One truth had become evident to him: Suzanne made use of her husband as a scarecrow to avoid having to receive him, René, in her own house! Why? unless she had a mystery in her life to conceal. What mystery? Colette had taken care to reply in advance to that question. Under the influence of this horrible suspicion René had conceived a plan, very simple in execution, the result of which it seemed to him must be decisive: to take advantage of the husband's invitation by asking Suzanne's permission to visit her. If she said yes, she had nothing to hide; if she said no? The young man to whom all these thoughts recurred continued to gaze at the beloved face upon his shoulder. How each of her fine features evoked a memory in him! How much faith he had felt in those eyes of fresh, clear blue! What delicate thoughts did he believe dwelt in that noble forehead! With what tender abandon had he listened to the words from that small and sinuous mouth! No, Colette's words could not be true! But what was the object of her lies—a first, second, and a third? Yes, she had lied to him three times. There are no insignificant lies. René felt it at that moment, and also realised that confidence, like love, was subject to the great law of all or nothing. It is or it is not. Those who have lost it know only too well.

"Poor René," Suzanne's voice repeated. She saw

he was in that state of extreme sorrow when being pitied softens the heart and opens it.

"Yes, very poor," said the young man, moved by the mark of pity he had received at the moment he felt the greatest need of it, and gazing right into her eyes. "Listen, Suzanne, I prefer to tell you everything. I have reflected. This life we are leading together cannot last. I am too unhappy over it. It does not suffice for my love. To see you furtively thus, for an hour to-day, an hour the day after to-morrow, then not to know what you are doing nor share any part of your existence is too cruel. Be silent, let me speak. There was a serious objection to your receiving me at your house—your husband. Ah, well! I have seen him. I have endured seeing him. We shook hands. Since it is over, at least allow me to enjoy the benefit of my effort. I know that there is no pride in what I am telling you, but I am proud no longer. I love you. I feel that I am nourishing evil thoughts about you. I beg of you to allow me to visit you, to live in your set, to see you elsewhere than here, where we only meet occasionally."

She went away from him shaking her head, and sinking into a chair replied:

"Ah, my beautiful dream, that dream you understood and seemed to cherish as much as I did, of a love between us alone, without any of those compromises which horrify you as they do me . . . so it is over!"

"So you will not permit me to visit you as I ask?" René insisted.

"But it is the death of our happiness you are asking me for," Suzanne cried; "you, whom I know to be so delicate and sensible, could not endure my set. Everything would wound you. You do not know the society in which I am obliged to live and how ill suited you are for it. Then you would hold me responsible for your disillusionment. Renounce that fatal idea, my love, renounce it, I entreat you."

"What have you to conceal in your life which you do not wish me to see?" the young man asked as he looked fixedly at her. He did not take into account that Suzanne, in talking to him, had only one object: to make him give the reason for this unexpected desire to change their relations—and it must be the same reason which had made him sad the other day, the same which had taken him so suddenly to Madam Komof's. She did not mistake the sense of René's question, and she replied, in the broken voice of a victim crushed by injustice:

"What, René, are you talking to me like this? No. Someone has poisoned your heart. Such ideas do not come from you. But come to my house, come as often as you please. Something to hide in my life, I who would rather die than tell you a lie!"

"Then why did you lie to me the other day?" René cried. Overcome by the despair he thought he read in those beautiful eyes, disarmed by the offer she had just made, incapable of any longer keeping the secret of his suffering, he felt that need of recounting his sorrows which is equivalent, in a quarrel with a woman, to running one's head into the noose.

"I have lied to you!" Suzanne answered.

"Yes," he insisted, "when you told me you went to the theatre with your husband *tête-à-tête*."

"But I did."

"So did I," René interrupted; "there was someone else in the box."

"Desforges!" Suzanne said; "but, poor René, you are mad. He came in to see us in one of the intervals and my husband kept him till the play was over. Desforges!" she went on with a smile, "he is nobody. I never thought of mentioning him. Come, seriously, you cannot be jealous of Desforges?"

"You were so gay, so happy," René replied in a voice which already showed signs of giving way.

"Ungrateful wretch," she said; "if you could only have read my mind! But it is this necessity of always dissimulating which causes the unhappiness of my life, and to see you reproach me! No, René, it is too hard! It is too unjust!"

"Forgive! Forgive!" the young man cried, for his mistress's perfect manner was to him irresistible evidence. "It is true! Someone has poisoned my mind—Colette. How right you were to distrust Claude!"

"I did not allow him to make love to me," Suzanne said. "Men do not forgive that."

"The wretch!" the poet went on violently, and as if to rid himself of his anguish by utterance: "He knew I loved you. How? Because I was clumsy, embarrassed, the only time I talked to him about you. He knows me so well! He guessed everything, and

told it all to his mistress with other slanders. No, I cannot repeat them to you."

"Repeat them, friend, repeat them," Suzanne insisted. She had upon her face at that moment the proud, resigned smile of the innocents going to their martyrdom; she went on: "They have told you that I have had lovers before you?"

"If it were only that," René said.

"What then?" she went on. "Besides, how does it matter what people say when you, my René, were able to believe it! Come, confess yourself all the same, so as to have nothing on your mind. I have at least the right to exact that."

"Quite true," the young man replied, with as much shame as if he had been the guilty party, and he stammered rather than pronounced the following words: "Colette told me to verify from Claude that you were—no! I cannot utter it—that Desforges—"

"Desforges again," Suzanne interrupted with a smile of sweet irony, "it is too funny!" She did not want René to formulate the accusation she could now guess. Her mistress's dignity could not descend to such a discussion. "You have been told without a doubt that Desforges had been my lover—was so still. But it is so silly that it is hardly infamous. Poor old friend, who has known me since I was so high. He was always with my father. He saw me grow up. He loves me like a daughter. And that is the man! No, René, swear to me you did not believe it. Have I deserved to be so judged?"

CHAPTER XVII

EVIDENCE

THERE are, in that strange moral malady of jealousy, delightful periods, the intervals between the attacks. For some days or hours the sensations of love resume their divine savour, as those of life do in convalescence. Suzanne so thoroughly convinced René of the folly of his suspicions that he wished to outdo her in generosity. The permission to visit the Rue Murillo, upon which he had so insisted, he refused to profit by. Two or three phrases, pronounced with a certain look and toss of the head, will always prevail over the worst suspicions of an ardent lover, at least till he sees with his own eyes a proof of the treachery—and yet? But here the elements which composed the first suspicion were so fragile! So it was with absolute good faith that the young man said to his mistress, who was veritably delighted at this unexpected result:

“No, I will not visit you. I was mad to desire to change our love. We are so happy in this mystery.”

“Yes, till some evil person makes you doubt ~~me~~,” she replied. “Only promise to tell me everything.”

“I swear to you, my love, I will,” he replied; “but I know you now, and I am sure of myself.”

He said it and believed it. Suzanne believed it

too; and she gave herself up to the charm of her recovered happiness, realising she would have a second battle to fight on Claude's return. But could the latter say more than had been already said? Besides, she would be forewarned of his return by René, and if the first interview between the two men did not end in a definite rupture it would be time for her to act. She would call upon her lover to break with Claude or else cease to see her. She was sure in advance of his reply. The poet, in spite of his protestations, without a doubt, felt himself less master of himself, for his heart beat with strange emotion when his sister told him, point-blank, about a week after his scene with Suzanne, on his return from the library:

"Claude Larcher has returned."

"Has he dared to present himself here?" René cried.

"I received him," Emilie said with obvious embarrassment; "and he asked me when he could see you."

"You ought to have answered him, 'Never,'" the young man interrupted.

"René," Emilie replied, "so old a friend, who has been so good and so devoted, how could I? I prefer to conceal nothing from you," she went on. "I asked him what quarrel there was between you. He seemed to me to be so astonished, so painfully astonished. No, that man has done you no harm, I swear. It is a misunderstanding. I told him to come to-morrow morning, when he would be sure to catch you."

"Why do you interfere?" René went on in a passion. "Have I instructed you to look after my business for me?"

"What a nice way to talk to me!" Emilie said, as her brother's tone cut her to the heart and the tears came into her eyes.

"Come, don't cry," her brother said, ashamed of his brusqueness, "perhaps it is better so. I will see Claude. I owe him that. But afterwards I wish his name never mentioned in my presence. Do you understand, never. . . ."

In spite of the apparent firmness of his anger the poet could hardly sleep during the night which separated him from that interview. He did not, however, doubt its result. But it was in vain that he stiffened his resentment against his old friend, he could not succeed in hating him. He had too sincerely loved this singular being, so attractive, when he did not displease at first sight, for his good faith, his original turn of mind, and even his faults, which only harmed himself, and especially a sort of natural generosity, which was indestructible and invincible. At the moment of final rupture René recalled the delicate way in which the already well-known author had received his first efforts. Claude, then very poor, was master at Saint André School when René was a scholar there in the sixth form. In this honourable, and pious establishment a legend was attributed to this eccentric professor. Pupils pretended to have seen him in an open carriage with a very pretty woman dressed in red. Then Claude had disappeared from

the school. René had met him again, when he had already become half famous, as the best man at Emilie's wedding with Fresneau. They had talked. Claude had asked to see his verses. With what elder brother's indulgence had the fifteen-years-old author read his maiden effort! How he had at once treated his young friend as an equal! With what cleverness of judgment he had applied to these outlines the process of the higher criticism, that which encourages an artist and points out his faults without crushing him. Then the story of *Sigisbée* had occurred, when Claude devoted himself to René as if he had not been a dramatic author himself. The poet knew enough of the literary world to be sure that simple kindness of one generation to the next was a very rare thing. His rapid success had already made him feel the sensation, the most bitter perhaps of the years of apprenticeship: envy met with from the masters he admired the most at the school where he had shaped his talents, at whose feet he would have liked to lay his laurel crown. In Claude Larcher taste for other people's talent was as instinctive, as much alive as if he had not been for fifteen years an author. This friendship, more than precious, unique, was about to terminate! But was it his, René's, fault? He turned over and over in his bed as these memories came back to his mind one after the other. Why had Larcher spoken to the terrible Colette as he had done? Why had he betrayed his young friend, his younger brother? Why? This painful question led René to ideas from which he instinctively turned away.* The famous "Sling mud,

some will be sure to stick " of Basile translates one of the saddest and most undisputed truths of the human heart. In truth, René would have despised himself for doubting Suzanne after their explanation. But there is a poisoned residuum of distrust which leaves suspicion in the soul, even though it be dissipated, and if the young man had dared to look into the depths of his soul he would have found proof of this in the unhealthy curiosity he felt to learn from Claude himself the complete reasons for the lying accusation launched against his mistress. This curiosity, the remembrances of so long a *liaison*, a sort of fear of seeing again a man who, by his position of seniority, had always held the advantage over him, all contributed to diminish the anger of the wounded lover. He tried to work up himself to the same pitch he had reached that evening when he paced the Avenue de l'Opéra after leaving Colette's dressing-room, but he did not succeed. Like all persons who know themselves to be weak he wished to put at once an irreparable event between himself and Claude, and when the latter, shown in by Françoise, about nine o'clock in the morning, approached him with outstretched hands, with a " Good morning, René," the poet kept his hand in his pocket. The two men remained for a moment standing facing one another both very pale. Larcher's face, tanned by travel, presented that contracted physiognomy which reveals the ravages of the fixed idea. Beneath the shock of the insult his eyes had flamed. René had known him to be carried away to the extent of madness, and he could guess

that the hand he had refused to clasp would be uplifted for a blow. But will was stronger than offended pride, and Claude went on, in a voice which trembled with suppressed fury:

"Vincy, do not try me. No, you are a child, I must have sufficient good sense for the two of us. Come! Come! Listen, René, I know everything, you understand—yes, everything. I came yesterday. Your sister told me that you were enraged with me, and many⁹ other things which began to enlighten me. Your silence had cut me to the heart. I thought you were Colette's lover. The imbecile! Fortunately she never realised that was the way to attack me. On leaving here I went to her house. I found her alone. I learned of the infamy she had committed and what she had told you in her dressing-room. The hussy triumphed. Then I arrived at the right conclusion." He began to pace the room, absorbed in the memory of the scene which had come into his mind and oblivious of his questioner. "I have beaten her like a peasant. What good did that do! I threw her upon the ground, and struck, and struck and struck! She screamed out: 'Forgive me! Forgive me.' Ah, I could have killed her with pleasure! How beautiful she was with her hair down. Afterwards she grovelled at my feet, but I left her. She will be able to show the bruises to her lover and tell him who was the cause of them! How being a brute sometimes relieves one!" Then, stopping suddenly in front of René: "All that because she had touched you! Yes or no," he insisted in the same angry tones, "is

it because of what that girl told you that you have quarrelled with me? "

"That is the reason," René coldly answered.

"Very well," Claude went on as he took a seat, "then we can talk. There is no misunderstanding between us, is there? You will allow me to dot all the 'i's.' If I have understood correctly, that hussy Colette told you two things. Let us take them in order. The first was that I told her you were Madam Moraines' lover. Excuse me," he insisted, as the poet made a gesture. "Between you and I, and when it is a question of our friendship, I scoff at the solemn conventions of Society which forbid the mention of a woman's name. I am not a member of Society, so I name her. The first infamy. Colette lied to you. I said this to her exactly—I recall the phrase as if it were yesterday; I regretted my words as I uttered them: 'I believe poor René is falling in love with Madam Moraines.' I had no information except that given me by your emotion when you spoke of that woman to me. But Colette had seen you supping at her side and greatly impressed by her. We joked, as people do on such hypotheses, without attaching any importance to it whatever, on my side at any rate. After all, you were my friend. Your sentiment might be serious; it was. I was wrong, and I beg your pardon frankly, and in spite of the insult you have just offered me—upon the faith of the worst of women—your best, your oldest friend."

"But, wretch!" René cried, "since you knew the sort of woman she was, why did you sell me to her? Again, if you had only spoken of me I would forgive you."

"Let us pass on to the second point," Claude interrupted in the same methodical and determined tone of voice; "that is to say, the second untruth. She has told you that I informed her of Madam Moraines' relations with Baron Desforges. It is false. She learned them long ago from all the Salvaneys, with whom she has dined, supped, flirted and the rest. No, René; if I reproach myself with anything it is not with having talked of Madam Moraines to her, for I told her nothing she did not know better than I. It is because I did not open my heart to you when you came to me. I was not unaware of the baseness of this Society Colette, yet I did not denounce her to you when there was yet time! Yes, I ought to have spoken, to have cried out, to have warned you: 'Make love to that woman, but do not love her.' Yet I was silent! My sole excuse is that I did not think her disinterested enough to enter into your life as she has done. I said to myself: 'He has no money, there is no danger.'"

"So," René, who had hardly been able to contain himself since Claude had begun to speak of Suzanne in such terms, cried, "you believe in the slander Colette told me about Madam Moraines and Baron Desforges?"

"Do I believe it?" Larcher replied, looking at his friend in astonishment. "Am I the man to invent a story like that about a woman?"

"When a man has made love to that woman," the poet said, pronouncing the words very slowly and giving them an intonation of the profoundest con-

tempt, "and she has repulsed him, she is respected all the less!"

"I!" Claude cried. "I made love to Madam Moraines! I! I! I! I understand, she told you so." He burst into a nervous laugh. "When we narrate such traits as those in our plays we are accused of calumniating the hussies! Slander them! As if it were possible! They are all the same. And you believed it! You believed of me, Claude Larcher, the villainy, that I would dishonour an honourable woman in revenge for my wounded self-conceit? Come, René, look me straight in the face. Have I the face of a hypocrite? Have you ever known me to be one? Have I proved to you that I loved you? Ah, well! I give you my word of honour that she has lied to you, just as Colette has done. She desired to cause a quarrel between us, just as Colette did. Ah, the wretches! I was far away, dying of grief, and not a word of pity, because, between two kisses, that wretch, worse than the others, accused me of an infamous act. Yes, worse than the others. They sell themselves for bread; but that one barter herself for a little of the miserable luxury of the upstarts of to-day."

"Silence, Claude, silence," René said in a terrible voice. "You are killing me." A tempest of sentiments was let loose in him, sudden, furious and ungovernable. He did not doubt his friend's sincerity, and that sincerity, joined to the accent of conviction with which Claude had spoken of Desforges, imposed upon the unhappy lover a vision of Suzanne's falseness, so painful that he could not bear it. He lost control

of himself, and rushing at his cruel questioner seized him by the coat collar and shook him so hard that his coat was torn. "When one man comes to affirm such things to another about the woman he loves he gives proofs, do you hear, proofs, proofs."

"You are mad," Claude retorted as he freed himself. "The whole of Paris will give you proofs, my poor child! Not one person, but ten, twenty or thirty, who will tell you that seven years ago the Moraines were ~~ruined~~. Who placed Moraines in an assurance company? Desfor~~ges~~. He is a director of that company, as well as being a deputy, and late counsellor of State. Desfor~~ges~~ is an enormous person without seeming to be so, and one who can afford many other luxuries! Whom do you find there when you call in the Rue Murillo? Desfor~~ges~~. When you meet Madam Moraines at the theatre? Desfor~~ges~~. Do you think he is the man to play at platonic love with this pretty woman married to a fool of a husband? Such foolishness is all very well for you and I. But a Desfor~~ges~~! Ah! where are your eyes and ears when you are at her house?"

"I have only been there three times," René said.

"Only three times?" Claude repeated as he looked at his friend. Emilie's plaintive confidences the previous evening had left him with no doubt as to the young man's relations with Suzanne. This imprudent explanation gave him a glimpse of the strange character those relations must assume. "I ask you nothing," he went on; "it is an understood thing that honour compels us to be silent about such

women, as if real honour did not consist in denouncing to the world their infamy. Then many other victims would be spared! Proofs? You want proofs? Find them for yourself. I only know two ways of finding out a woman's secrets: open her letters or have her followed. Be easy in your mind, Madam Moraines never writes. Shadow her."

"It is an ignoble thing you advise me to do!" the poet cried.

"There is nothing noble or ignoble in love," Larcher replied. "I myself have done the same. Yes, I put private detectives on Colette's track! A *liaison* with a woman like her ends in war to the knife." "

"No, no," René replied, shaking his head, "I cannot do it."

"Then follow her yourself!" the implacable logician went on. "I know my Desforges. He is somebody, don't make any mistake. I used to study him in the past, when I still believed in that foolish idea, observation, to produce talent. That man is an astounding mixture of order and disorder, of debauchery and hygiene. Their appointments must be regulated like everything else in his life: once a week and at the same time, not too near lunch-time, for that would interfere with his digestion; not too near dinner, that would interfere with his calls and his bezique at the club. Watch her. In less than a week you will find out. I wish I could say that I had any doubts as to the result of your inquiry! Ah! poor child, it was I who dragged you into this mire! You were leading so happy a life here when I came to lead

you into the infamous society where you met this monster. But if it had not been her it would have been another. All those I love I do them harm! But tell me that you forgive me! I need your friendship, you see. Come, a good impulse."

As Claude stretched out his hands to the young man the latter took them, pressed them with all his might, and sank down on the couch, the same one on which Suzanne had sat, weeping and crying:

"How I suffer!"

Claude had given his friend a week. Four days had not elapsed before René came to the mansion of the Saint-Euvertes one fine afternoon with so distressed a face that Ferdinand could not help exclaiming, when he opened the door:

"Poor M. Vincy, are you going to be like the master and fall ill?"

"What has happened?" Claude cried when René entered the room. The author was sitting at his desk, smoking as he worked. He threw away his cigarette, and in turn his face assumed a look of the keenest anxiety.

"You were right," René said in a stifled voice; "she is the worst of women."

"Not quite," Claude interrupted in tones of bitterness. "You must give Colette her due. But what did you do?"

"As you advised me," René replied in a strangely bitter tone, "and I have come to beg your pardon for doubting you. Yes, I watched her. What sensations mine were! The first, second and third day nothing

happened. She payed calls, visited the shops, but Desforges went to the Rue Murillo every one of those days. When I saw him go in from the depths of my cab, which stood at the corner of the street, I sweated in agony. At last, to-day, at two o'clock, she went out in a carriage. My cab followed her. After two or three calls the carriage stopped outside Galignani's—you know the English library under the arcades in the Rue de Rivoli. She got out. I saw her speak to her coachman, and the carriage drove away empty. She walked a few steps under the arcades. She wore a dark costume. How well I knew that dress! My heart beat. I was nearly mad. I felt that I had reached the decisive moment. I saw her disappear into a gateway. I went in after her. I found myself in a large courtyard with a sort of passage at the other extremity. The house had another entrance from the Rue du Mont Thabor. I scanned that street. No, she would not have had time to get away. Taking my chance I took up a position to watch the door. If she had a rendezvous there she would not leave the way she had entered. I waited for an hour and a quarter in a wine shop opposite. Then I saw her reappear with a double veil over her face. Ah! that veil and that walk! Just like the dress I knew too well to be mistaken. She had come out into the Rue du Mont Thabor. Her accomplice would depart by way of the Rue de Rivoli. I hastened thither. A quarter of an hour later the door opened and I found myself face to face—guess with whom? With Desforges! This time I have the proof! Oh, the hussy!"

"No! No!" Claude replied. "She is a woman, and they are all the same. Shall I give you confidence for confidence—that is to say, horror for horror? You know how Colette treated me when I implored her for a little pity? I beat her the other evening like a porter, and this is what she writes to me. Here." He held out to his friend a note which he had open in front of him upon the table. René took it mechanically and read the following lines:

"Two o'clock in the morning.

"You did not come, my love, and I waited for you till now. I shall wait for you all day to-day, and this evening after I have returned home from the theatre. I am acting in the first piece and I shall hasten. I beg of you to come to me. Think of my mouth. Think of my fair hair. Think of our kisses. Think of the woman who adores you, who cannot console herself for making you suffer, and who loves you madly,
YOUR LITTLE COLETTE."

"It is a real love-letter," Larcher said with a sort of fierce joy. "It is crueller than all to be loved like this because one behaved like a ruffian! But I do not love her now, neither her nor anyone else. I hate love now and I am going to amputate my heart. Do as I do."

"Can I?" René replied. "No! you do not know what that woman was to me!" Suddenly, giving way to the fury of the love in him, he began to groan with convulsed features, weeping and wringing his hands. "You neither know how much I loved her,

nor how much I believed in her, nor what I have sacrificed for her! Then comes this hideous attachment between her and Desforges! Ah!" He seemed just as if he were seized with nausea. "She should have deceived me with another, with a man of whom I could think with hatred and rage—but without disgust. See, I cannot even be jealous of that one. How mercenary she is!" Getting up and clutching Claude's arms in frenzy: "He is a director of various companies, did you not tell me? Ah, well, do you know what she proposed to me the other day? To let me make money from his information. Then I, too, should have been supported by the Baron. It is quite natural, is it not, for the old to pay for everything—woman, husband and sweetheart too! Ah! If I could! She will be at the Opéra this evening: suppose I went there? Suppose I seized her by the hair and spat in her face, there before her own set, crying out to them all that she was the most degraded and dissolute of women?" Then, falling back upon his chair and bursting into tears: "She took me, if you had only seen her, hour by hour! You have rightly told me to distrust women! But why? You love Colette, an actress, a creature who had taken lovers before you! Whereas there is not a line upon the other woman's face which does not swear that it is impossible for me not to have been dreaming. It is just as if I had seen angels telling lies. Yes, I hold the proof, the indisputable proof. She walked along the pavement of the Rue du Mont Thabor with the same step. Why did not I rush after her to the threshold of that

infamous den? . I would have strangled her with my hands like an animal. Ah, Claude, to think that I quarrelled with you on her account! And the other woman! I have trampled upon the noblest of hearts. I have trod it under foot in order to go to this monster! It is only justice; I have deserved it all! But what is there in Nature that it can produce such creatures?"

Long did this lament continue. Claude listened to it with his head resting on his hand, without making any reply. He had suffered, and he knew that lamentation relieved his sufferings. He pitied the unhappy boy who sobbed as if his heart would break, and the lucid analyst in him could not help observing the difference between the character of the poet's despair and that he himself had experienced so many times in similar circumstances. He never remembered having, even in his worst moment, suffered agony like this, without watching his own sufferings, whereas René presented the spectacle of a really young and sincere creature who did not hold a mirror in his hand to study his own tears. These strange reflections upon the diversity of the nature of souls did not prevent him from having more than sympathy, profound emotion, in his voice as he replied, when René at last stopped his plaint:

"Our dear Heine has said: 'Love is the secret malady of the heart.' You are in the period of invasion. Will you take the advice of a veteran? Pack your trunk and put many miles between yourself and Suzanne. A pretty name and one well chosen! A Suzanne who is an old man's darling!

At your age you will be quickly cured. I have cured myself. I am still stupefied by the fact. For three days I have ceased to love Colette. Meanwhile, I do not wish to leave you alone; come and dine with me. We will drink deep and enjoy ourselves. That will revenge our heartaches."

René had sunk, when his lamentation ceased, into that sort of moral coma which succeeds outbursts of grief. He allowed himself to be taken as in a dream through the Rue du Bac, the Rue de Sèvres and along the boulevard to the Lavenue Restaurant, which is at the corner of Montparnasse Station, and which for a long while was frequented by several famous painters and sculptors of our time. The two authors had a private room, upon the mirror of which Claude soon found Colette's name, clumsily scratched among twenty others. He showed this souvenir of evenings of the past to his friend, then rubbing his hands and repeating, "One must flaunt one's past," he ordered a most elaborate repast, asked for two bottles of the oldest Corton, and during the whole of the dinner did not cease to expound his theories on women, the while his companion hardly ate anything, and gazed upon in his mind the divine face in which he had so thoroughly believed. Was it possible that he was not dreaming, that his Suzanne was one of those women of whom Claude spoke with such profound contempt?

"Especially," the latter said, "do not take your revenge. Vengeance after love is like the alcohol of the steaming punch. One attaches oneself to women

by the harm one does them as much as by what they do us. Imitate me, not the Claude Larcher of the past, the one of the present who drinks, eats and laughs at Colette as she has scoffed at him. Absence and silence are the sword and buckler in such a fight. Colette wrote to me; I did not reply. She came to the Rue de Varenne. The door was closed to her. Where am I? What am I doing? She does not know. That enrages her more than anything. A supposition. You start to-morrow morning for Italy, England or Holland, as you please. Suzanne is there, thinking you engaged in piously communicating beneath the elements of her untruths, and you are in the corner of your carriage watching the telegraph poles fly past, and saying to yourself, 'Two can play the game, my angel.' Then in three, four or five days the angel begins to be anxious. A note is sent by a servant to the Rue Cœtlogon. The servant returns with the news that M. Vincy is travelling! Days pass, and he does not return; he does not write; he is happy elsewhere. How I should like to be there to see Desforges' face when she vents her anger upon him. For in the case of these just folk, the one who stays always has to pay for the one who departs. But what is the matter? "

" Nothing," René said, though Claude had hurt him when he uttered the Baron's hated name. " I think you are right, and I shall leave Paris to-morrow without seeing her again."

It was with a phrase like that the two friends parted. Claude had insisted upon accompanying his

friend as far as the Rue Cœtlogon. He shook his hand at the door, repeating:

"I will send Ferdinand in the morning to find out the time of your departure. The sooner the better, and especially without seeing her again!

"Make your mind easy," René replied.

"Poor boy!" Claude thought as he ascended the Rue d'Assas. He was walking slowly along by the side of the cabs standing in front of the old Carmelite Convent, instead of going in the direction of his own home. He turned to see if his friend had really disappeared. He stopped a few moments, the victim of visible hesitation. He looked at the clock and saw it was a quarter past ten.

"The performance at the theatre begins at half-past eight; time to change her dress. Bah!" he went on, talking to himself aloud. "I should be too stupid to miss such an evening. Cab, cab!" He aroused the man asleep on the box of the cab which seemed to be the best-horsed. "Rue de Rivoli, at the corner of the statue of Joan of Arc, as quickly as you can."

The cab hurried off and crossed the corner of the Rue Cœtlogon. "He is weeping now," Claude said to himself; "all the same, if he were to see me on my way to visit Colette! He did not suspect that as soon as he went in the young man asked his astonished sister to get his dress suit ready. Poor Emilie wanted to question him; she was met by, "I have no time to talk," so dry and hard that she dared not insist. It was Friday, and René, as he told Claude, knew that Suzanne was now at the Opéra. He had reckoned it

was her fortnightly evening. Why had the idea of seeing her again, without any further delay, so overpowered him that he hustled his sister and Françoise in turn? Was he about to put his threat into execution and insult his treacherous mistress in public? Or did he desire to feast his eyes again upon that deceitful beauty, for the last time, before his departure? He had been able the other week, when he hurried to the Gymnase after his conversation with Colette, to reason with himself and discuss his sudden plan. The exterior analogy of that step with the one of to-day made him better realise, while the carriage bore him towards the Opéra, how everything had changed in and around him in so short a time. With what hope he repaired to the theatre then, and now with what thoughts full of despair! Why this step? He asked himself that question as he ascended the staircase, but he felt himself driven by a power superior to all calculation and desire. Since he had seen Suzanne enter and leave the house in the Rue du Mont Thabor he acted like an automaton. When he took his seat in his orchestra stall the ballet of *Faust*, which was being performed that evening, was just concluding. The first impression of the music upon his tense nerves was an almost morbid tenderness; tears welled to his eyes so rapidly that they dimmed his glasses when he directed them upon the part of the house where Suzanne's box was situated—that box in which she had appeared so divinely modest and pretty the evening after their meeting at the Countess Komof's, but no more modest nor pretty

than she did now. She was leaning forward, this time in a blue costume, with pearls around her delicate throat and diamonds in her fair hair. Another woman, whom René had never seen before, was sitting near her, a brunette all in white and covered with jewels. Three men were visible in the shadows of the box. One was unknown to the poet, the other two were Moraines and Desforges. Yes, the unhappy man had all three of them under his eyes: the woman who had sold herself to the world and the husband who profited by it—at least René thought so. This infamous *tableau* changed his tenderness into fury. Everything combined to madden him: indignation at seeing so much ideal grace upon the face of the Suzanne who that very afternoon escaped stealthily to a shameful rendezvous, physical jealousy brought to its highest pitch by the presence of the fortunate rival, and last of all, a sort of impotent humiliation at finding his perfidious mistress happy and admired, in the glory of her worldly sway, while he, her victim, was there dying of grief without punishing her!

After the ballet was over and the interval had begun René reached that pitch of anger which everyday language rightly calls frigid rage. At these moments, and by a contrast analogous to that which takes place in certain attacks of lucid madness, the frenzy of the soul is accompanied by a complete domination of the nerves. The man can come and go, smile and chat; to all appearances he is calm, yet within him is a whirlwind of murderous thoughts. The most daring attacks then seem quite natural, and

so does the greatest cruelty. An idea had entered the poet's head: to go into that box of which Madam Moraines was queen and tell her the contempt he felt for her! How? He hardly considered that. He only knew he must solace himself whatever the result. As he passed along the corridor, at that time full of smart people, he was so distracted that he jostled several persons without uttering a word of apology. He finally asked the attendant to point out to him the sixth box on the right.

"Baron Desforages'? " the woman asked.

"Quite right," he replied; "he pays for the theatre as well," he thought. "It is quite the natural thing!" But the door had already been opened for him, and he crossed the little drawing-room to the box proper, where he saw Moraines turn, smile at him with his simple, frank face, and the good fellow shook his hand in the English fashion, saying to him, as if they were used to meeting every day:

"Are you quite well?" And, calling his wife, who had seen René without showing any signs of astonishment upon her face, "My old friend," he said, "M. Vincy."

"I have not forgotten the gentleman," Suzanne replied, greeting the visitor with a gracious inclination of the head, "although he appears to have forgotten me."

The perfect ease with which the phrase was uttered, the smile which emphasized it, the shameful obligation of shaking hands with this husband whom he looked upon as a parasite, and of greeting Baron Desforages as

well as the other persons present in the box, all these little details contrasted too strongly with the young man's inner fever for him not to remain for a few moments seemingly disconcerted. Life in Society is like that. Tragic scenes take place, but without noise, and amid the false politeness of conversation, the habitual compromise of manners and the futile ornamentation of pleasure. Moraines had offered René a seat behind Suzanne, and the latter was questioning him about his musical tastes with as much apparent indifference as if his visit had not a terrible significance for her. Desforges and Moraines talked to the other lady. René heard them remark upon the composition of the house. He was not used to that mastery of self which allowed women of the world to talk of chiffons or music with a devouring anxiety in the depths of their hearts. He stammered replies to Suzanne's phrases without understanding what he was saying. At one second, as she leaned a little towards him, he breathed the scent of heliotrope she generally used. This impression brought back to his mind the memory of the kisses he had given her. He at last ventured to look at her. He saw those sinuous lips, that rosy complexion, those blue eyes, those shoulders and that throat upon which his lips had been pressed. His eyes then expressed a sort of savage delirium of which Madame Moraines was almost afraid. She had realised, from the young man's appearance alone, that something extraordinary was taking place; but she was under the eyes of Desforges, and she must be careful not to make a single mistake. On the

other hand, the slightest imprudence on René's part would ruin her. The whole of her life depended upon a gesture, a word from the young man, and she instinctively knew that he was capable of pronouncing that word and making that gesture! She picked up the fan and the lace handkerchief she had laid upon the front of the box and got up, passing her hand across her forehead.

"I am too warm here," she said, addressing the poet, who had got up at the same time she did. "Will you come into the little drawing-room, we can talk better there."

When they were both sitting upon the couch in that narrow ante-room she said to him in a loud tone:

"Is it long since you saw our friend Madam Komof?" Then, in a low voice: "What is the matter, my love? What has happened?"

"I have found out everything," René answered, dropping his voice, "and I have come here to tell you that you are the worst of women. Do not take the trouble to answer me. I know everything. I tell you, I know the time you went to the house in the Rue du Mont Thabor, the time you left it, and the person you met there. Do not lie; I was there, I saw you. This is the last time I shall speak to you, but you understand. You are a wretch, a wretch."

Suzanne fanned herself while he uttered these terrible phrases. The emotion of the blow they struck her did not prevent her from realising that it was necessary to cut short at any cost this scene with her

maddened lover, who obviously could not control himself any longer. She leaned towards the box and called her husband.

"Paul," she said, "see if the carriage is at hand. I do not know what is the matter with me, perhaps it is the heat of the house, but I have an attack of giddiness. You will excuse me, M. Vincy?"

"It is extraordinary," Moraines said to the poet, who was leaving the box with his wife, "she was so gay this evening. But these theatres are not sufficiently ventilated. She will be grieved at not being able to have a longer talk with you, she admires your talent so much! Come and see us again. Good-night."

He again shook the young man's hand with his customary vigour, and then disappeared into the vestibule, where the footmen were waiting for their masters. The preliminary bars of the fifth act of *Faust* were being played. René was seized with a fresh fit of rage, which he soothed by the utterance, almost aloud, in the now deserted corridor, of this phrase: "Ah! I will have my revenge!"

CHAPTER XVIII

THE HAPPIEST OF THE FOUR

SUZANNE knew Baron Desforges' expressions too well to think that the scene in the box had entirely escaped him. How much of it had he grasped? What did he think? Those were to her two questions of capital importance. It was impossible for her to answer them during the moments she was leaning on his arm and he was supporting her, as if he really thought she was ill, from the box to the bottom of the staircase which leads to the carriage entrance. The Baron's face had remained impenetrable. She herself did not feel strong enough to employ her usual faculties of observation. The comedy of her illness had only been half acted, so deeply had she been stricken with fear and grief by the sudden shock of her conversation with the young man. She had been afraid that René would make a scene and ruin her for ever, so obviously lacking in self-control was he. At the same time her most sincere and living passion had bled at this frightful outrage and still more terrible discovery. While raising her trailing dress and placing her blue satin shoes upon the stairs she was shaken by a tremor like that which a person feels on escaping a mortal danger after having had the courage to brave it. She

half smiled with trembling lips and a face overspread by pallor. It was a real relief to her to sit in the corner of the carriage with her husband near her. Before him at least there was no need for her to control her feelings. Just as the horse started she leant forward as if for a final adieu. The gleam of a gas jet fell full upon the Baron's face, which now expressed his real thoughts. Suzanne did not misread them for a second.

"He knows the truth," she said. "What will happen?" The carriage had been gone for a moment, and Desforges was still there twirling his moustache—in him a sign of extreme preoccupation. As the weather was fine he had not ordered his own carriage. It was his custom in dry weather to walk to his favourite club in the Rue Boissy d'Anglas from the place where he had spent the evening, even though there was a little theatre at the other end of the Boulevards. Smoking his cigar, the third of the day—his doctor did not allow him more—he loved to cross Paris, his Paris, the city he rightly prided himself upon knowing and enjoying as very few could. Desforges was not a cosmopolitan; he had a horror of travelling, which he called "the life of a package." This walk in the evening was his delight. He took advantage of it to turn over in his mind the various events of the day and balance his receipts and expenditure: "massage, fencing and the morning ride" going into the "receipts column, the warehousing of his health. "Burgundy drunk at dinner, or red port, his trifling sin, or the enjoyment of truffles, which Suzanne loved,"

going into the expenses column. When he allowed himself any trifling excess contrary to the wise regulations of his life, he carefully reasoned its advantages and disadvantages and concluded with an "it is worth it," or "it is not worth the trouble," just like a verdict. Then, too, this Paris, where he had lived from his childhood, was a place of memories. In him cynicism was joined to cleverness, and he did not practise the epicureanism of the senses. He professed the art of enjoying good times by recalling them. In one house he had kept a rendezvous with a charming mistress; another brought to his mind exquisite dinners in charming company. But when the Moraines' carriage had gone, on that very soft and warm May evening, although the day had been a particularly lucky one for him till René Vincy's visit to the box, he began his walk a prey to the most sorrowful and bitter impressions. Suzanne had not been mistaken. He knew the truth. The poet's entrance had struck him all the more because that very afternoon, on emerging after the rendezvous into the Rue de Rivoli, he had found himself face to face with the young man, who had gazed fixedly at him. "Where have I seen that face?" Desforges had vainly asked himself. "Where was my head?" he said to himself when Paul Moraines had named René Vincy to Suzanne. Immediately at the sight of the visitor's face he scented a mystery. When Suzanne had passed into the little drawing-room he had taken up a position which enabled him to follow their conversation out of the corner of his eye. Without

hearing what the poet said he gathered from the expression of his eyes, his wrinkled forehead and his gestures, that he was making a scene with Suzanne. The latter's assumed indisposition had not deceived him for a moment. He only believed in women's headaches up to a certain point. The trembling of his mistress's hand upon his arm as they descended the stairs had completed his conviction; and now on crossing the Place de l'Opéra, instead of going into ecstasies, as he usually did over the vast perspective of the avenue, quite recently lit with electric light, or upon the façade of the theatre, which he declared he preferred to all the Notre Dames, he formulated truths most mortifying to himself.

"I have been deceived," he said to himself, "at my age! That is a little strong—and for whom?" All the circumstances combined to render this humiliation more cruel: the perfection of the ruse by which Suzanne had deceived him, without his conceiving a single suspicion; the overwhelming suddenness of the discovery; and last of all the quality of his rival—an insignificant young man! Twenty details came back to his mind at once, some more painful than the others: the pitiful and abashed look on the poet's face on the occasion of their only meeting, the day following the *fête* at the Komof mansion; Suzanne's reveries, since inexplicable, of which he had taken little notice, allusions made by her to morning visits to the dentist, the Louvre or the Bon Marché. 'He, Baron Desforges, had swallowed it all! "I have been too stupid!" he repeated aloud. "But how can she

have done it? " The thing which completed his overthrow was his inability to understand the way she had acted even at the moment when René's attitude in the box left no room for doubt. No, there was no possible doubt. For her to have allowed such a scene and acted as she had done she must be his mistress. "But how?" he asked himself. "She has not received him at her house or I should have found out from Paul. She has not met him in Society. He goes nowhere." He repeated once more: "I have been too stupid!" He felt a real wave of anger against the woman who was the cause of the pain from which he was suffering. He had passed the Café de la Paix and he had to avoid two women who approached him. "They are all the same!" he said to himself. He took a few steps further and saw that he had allowed his cigar to go out. He made quite a violent gesture: "And cigars are like women." Then he shrugged his shoulders. He took another cigar from his case, held it to his ear to hear if it crackled, and saw a tobacco shop where he could light it. The Havana chanced to be delightful. The Baron inhaled the smoke like a connoisseur. "I was wrong," he thought, "tobacco does not deceive."

This agreeable sensation began to change the course of his ideas. He looked around him. He was at that moment almost at the end of the boulevard. The passers-by were moving about just as in broad daylight. Carriages passed rapidly. The light illuminated in almost fantastic fashion the new leaves of the trees. To the right, in the background, the Madeleine

raised its dark mass, and the sky was bluish and full of stars. This Parisian picture interested the Baron's eyes, for he resumed his reflection in a much more serene frame of mind. "Why," he asked himself, "should I be jealous?" When an instance of the sad passion was mentioned to him he usually shook his head and said: "Someone is making love to your mistress. What a compliment to your good taste."

"Me, jealous! That would be perfect!" When we have played a part in Society for years we play it for ourselves alone. Desforges was ashamed of this weakness—just as an officer, despatched on a mission at night in time of war, blushes at his fears and refuses to acknowledge the sensation in himself. "It is not true," the Baron gave himself the answer, "I am not jealous." He had a slight glow of pleased vanity at the thought that the picture of Suzanne the mistress of another man he had conjured up in his own mind, although it was not agreeable to him, did not produce that attack of keen suffering which is jealousy. In contrast he saw in his mind the poet's entry into the box, his face drawn and his whole being trembling with the unconquerable frenzy of sorrow. He was indeed a jealous man, and in the throes of the fatal mania. The antithesis between the relative calm of his own feelings and his rival's despair was so flattering to the Baron's pride that he had a second's real pleasure. Why should I be jealous? How has Suzanne deceived me? Did I expect of her a love such as this noodle of a poet dreamed? At fifty, what did I ask of her? To be amiable? She has been.

To make a place where I could pass my evenings? She has done so. Ah, well! then? She met a fine young fellow with a clear skin and a pretty mouth, an ardent lover. She has taken advantage of the opportunity. She could not ask me to offer him to her. But of the two he is the one who is deceived! He was at the door of his club when he formulated that rather French conclusion. The brutality of the expression which had come into his mind relieved him for a moment. "It is all the same," he thought, "what would Crucé say?" The clever collector had in the past sold him a picture which was not genuine at an exorbitant figure, and Desforges from that time cherished for him that sort of esteem mingled with hatred which clever men have for those who have duped them. He pictured to himself the smoking-room of the club, and the shrewd person narrating the adventure of Suzanne and René to two or three selected from his most envious friends. The idea was so odious to the Baron that it prevented him from ascending the staircase, and he walked in the direction of the Champs-Élysées combating it. "Bah! neither Crucé nor the others will know anything about it. Still, it is fortunate she did not select as her lover one of the fops of to-day." He turned round to look at the well-lighted windows of the club in the Rue Royale, which overlooked the Place de la Concorde. "Instead she has taken someone who is not in Society, whom I never met, and she has neither presented nor introduced him into Society. I must do her the justice to say she has been very polite over it. Yet,

just now, when she was trembling so it was on my account. Poor little woman!"

"Yes, poor little woman!" he went on as he resumed his mental monologue under the trees in the avenue. "That animal is capable of making her expiate her caprice to the full. He was enraged enough this evening! What a lack of taste and good manners! In my box too! What irony! If that good fellow was not a husband I had moulded she would be lost. Then he has the secret of our meetings in his hands. We must leave the Rue du Mont Thabor! No, that fellow is endurable!" It was one of his favourite expressions. He had a fresh burst of ill-humour, this time against the poet; but as he prided himself on being a brainy man, and one who did not suffer much from self-deception, he interrupted the outburst. "I want him to be jealous of me now. That would be a climax. But let me rather think what he can do. Blackmail? No. He is too young for that. An article in some paper? A poet with sentimental pretensions! That should not be his method. If he were to quarrel with her out of sheer indignation? That would be too fine! A poor devil, at that age, with very little money, in the hands of a pretty, amorous mistress, with all the refinements of luxury around her, and he would renounce all that for nothing! But if he asks her to break with me and she is foolish enough to give way to him?" He had a clear, precise vision of the disturbance such a rupture would make in his life. "First of all, no more Suzanne, and where should I find another so charming, so clever, who is

so attractive and used to my ways? Then, what evening amusements I should have to organise, without taking into consideration that I have no better friend in Paris than that good fellow Paul." He had, in order to reassure himself against these sad happenings, to recall the ties which made him indispensable to the Moraines' household. "No," he concluded, at the very moment he arrived at his own door in the Cours la Reine, "she will not sacrifice me, he will not part^e from her, and everything will be arranged. Everything always settles itself."

This assurance and philosophy were not without doubt as sincere as the strong man's vanity, which was the Baron's only weakness, would have wished, since he showed for the first time in his life unjust impatience to his valet, his pupil, who for years had presided over his retiring for the night. Still if, with the pre-occupation concerning his own line of conduct, he had more inward tremors than he would have consented to admit, this amiable egoist did not sleep less than his nightly allowance of seven hours. Among the systematic hygienic principles he adopted respect for his rest took first place. By the aid of a continuously active life in moderation, careful feeding, absolute regularity in rising and retiring to bed, and the care, as he himself put it, "of at midnight freeing his mind from all black ideas," he had acquired so perfect a habit of sleep at a fixed time that it would have needed an earthquake to keep him awake. When he opened his eyes the following morning, his ideas refreshed by an excellent night, the remnant of

his irritation was so thoroughly dissipated that he recalled the events of the previous evening with a smile.

"I am sure 'he' has not done as much," he said to himself as he thought of the sleepless hours René must have passed, "nor Suzanne," she was so upset last night, "nor Moraines." A slight indisposition of his wife's put this good fellow in a great state. "What a good title for a comedy: *The Happiest of the Four!*" His joke amused him, and when his medical attendant remarked, in the course of his massage, "Your muscles are in excellent order this morning, sir! They are supple, robust and firm like those of a man of thirty," his pleasure succeeded in dissipating almost all his bitterness. He had but one idea: how to prevent the previous evening's scene making any change in so comfortable an existence, and one so well adapted to his personality. He thought it over as he drank his chocolate, as he had his gallop in the Bois beneath a clear spring sky, as he sat at lunch about half-past twelve, facing his old relative, who had control of a part of his house—the linen, silver and the servants—till her time came to nurse his declining years. His conclusion was that word—so great in all public and private politics—Wait! "I must let the boy do silly things and work out his own destruction. I will be very amiable and have seen nothing." He made his way to the Rue Murillo on foot about two o'clock, ruminating upon this resolution. He stopped outside a curio shop he knew very well and noticed a Louis XVI. watch in worked gold, with a frame of roses

and an exquisite miniature. "Here is," he thought, "an excellent means of proving that I am still in the same position." He paid a very reasonable price for this curio, and congratulated himself doubly on his purchase when he saw, on entering the little drawing-room, with what anguish Suzanne was awaiting his visit. Her dark-rimmed eyes and pallor showed she had spent the night in formulating plans for overcoming the difficulties the scene with René had placed her in. By the way she looked at him the Baron understood she had no hopes of having escaped his perspicacity. That was the supreme homage which completed the staunching of the wound his self-respect had received, and he felt a real pleasure in presenting her with the case in which the tiny watch was enclosed with the question:

"Do you like it?"

"Delightful," Suzanne said; "and this shepherd and shepherdess are almost alive."

"Yes," Desforges replied, "they seem to be singing the song of the period:

"I have left all for ungrateful Sylvia,
She has deserted me and endured another lover."

He had formerly a good deal of success in the drawing-room with his well-trained tenor voice, and he hummed the refrain of the famous plaint with a variation of his own:

"Love's sorrows last but a moment,
Its pleasures endure for life."

"If you like to put this shepherd and shepherdess

upon a corner of your table they are better there than in my possession."

"How you spoil me!" Suzanne replied with some embarrassment.

"No," Desforges said, "I am spoiling myself. Am I not your friend above everything?" Then, kissing her hand, he added, in a serious tone, which contrasted with his jesting: "And you will never have a better."

That was all. A word more and he compromised his dignity. A word less and Suzanne might think he was her dupe. She experienced, for the delicate way in which he had treated her, a feeling of gratitude—the more sincere as this delicacy allowed her to think of René only. That was the climax of her anxiety during her sleepless night: how to humour the one while retaining the other, now that the two men had met and realised their rivalry. Break with the Baron? She had thought of it, but how could she? She found herself entangled in the net of the lies she had been telling her husband for years. Their style of living could not be maintained without the aid of her rich lover. To break with him was to condemn herself at once to look for another affair of the same sort, or even to sink lower. On the other hand, to keep Desforges meant breaking with René. The Baron would never understand that in loving the poet she was not stealing anything from him. Do men ever admit similar truths? While here the latter was good and clever enough not even to mention what he had noticed. Never, even when paying her largest bills, had he appeared as generous as at that moment when,

by his attitude, he permitted her to devote herself entirely to the task of recaptivating her young lover with kisses she could not, would not do without.

"He is right," she told herself when Desforges had gone, "he is my best friend;" and at once, with that admirable facility for hope which women possess, when a first piece of good fortune surprises them, she wished to believe that matters would arrange themselves as easily in the other direction. Reclining upon the long chair in the little drawing-room, distractedly fingering the pretty watch, her thoughts were almost entirely fixed upon the young poet and the method she must employ to recapture him. It was necessary to state the position precisely and look it straight in the face. What did René know? He had informed her upon that point; he had seen her leave the house in the Rue du Mont Thabor, and he had also seen Desforges depart. Now the Baron, as a precaution, never left by the same door as his mistress. Then René knew of the existence of the two entrances. Had he seen her leave her carriage and walk to the entrance in the Rue di Rivoli? That was most probable. If chance only had led him to come across her first of all and then the Baron, he could have concluded nothing from the two meetings. No. He had watched and followed her. What influence had urged him on? She had left him at the beginning of the week after their last meeting so reassured, so loving and so happy! There was only one possible cause for the re-birth of suspicion strong enough to lead to espionage: Claude's return. She

experienced a feeling of hatred for that man. "If he is the cause of this new alarm he shall pay for it," she thought. But she came back at once to the danger which, for the time being, was of more consequence than her hatred for Larcher. The fact was there: positive; for one reason or another René had surprised the secret of her meetings with Desforges, and his grief had been so great that he had at once been obliged to tell her. What love there was in that mad proceeding at the Opéra which nearly ruined her! Instead of hating him, she loved him all the more. It was a proof of passion, then a sign of her power over the young man. No, a lover who loves with such frenzy is not difficult to recapture. It was only necessary for her to see and speak to him, to explain by word of mouth that visit to the Rue du Mont Thabor. She might quite easily have gone to visit a sick friend, who was also a friend of Desforges. But the carriage she had dismissed at Galignani's? She desired to walk a little way. But the two entrances? So many respectable houses are built like that! She knew from experience only too well the trusting side of René's character to doubt that he would let himself be convinced. At the first moment he had been overwhelmed by evidence which corroborated his suspicions. To-day he would have begun to doubt and plead the cause of his love to himself. She had reached that stage of her reasoning when the servant announced that her carriage was waiting. The desire to secure René possessed her again so completely; she was, on the other hand, so sure that her presence

would sweep away his resistance that a plan suddenly occurred to her. Why should she not try to recapture the young man at once? Yes, why not now that she had nothing to fear from Desforges? In love quarrels the most rapid reconciliations are the best. Would he have the strength to repulse her if she went to him in that little room, the scene of her first visit, and brought him that new and undoubted proof of her love, saying to him: "You have outraged, slandered and tortured me. I am unable to bear your doubts or your sorrow: here I am!" She had no sooner conceived the possibility of this decisive step than she clung to it as a certain way of escaping the anguish which had tortured her since the previous evening. She dressed herself so rapidly that her maid, Céline, was astonished, and yet she had never looked prettier than she did in the grey spring costume she had chosen. Without hesitation she told the coachman to drive to the Rue Cœtlogon. Her ideas of prudence had been cast to the winds and given place to others. "Suppose René is not at home! But he must be. He is expecting a letter from me, some sign of my existence." That was almost the same question she had asked herself and answered on her first visit in March, two and a half months before. She could measure, by the difference in the emotion she felt, the distance she had traversed since that time. Then she hastened to the young man's dwelling, attracted by the most ardent of caprices, but only a caprice. To-day it was love which fired her blood, the love which hungers and thirsts to be loved, the love which sees but one man in

the world, and which would hasten towards its desire into the jaws of a loaded canon without trembling. Yes, she loved with her body, with her mind, with her whole being; she felt it in the fury of impatience into which she was thrown by the progress of her carriage, however rapid it was, in her fear that her visit might be in vain. She recognised with extreme emotion the gate which shut off the entrance of the street. It was now a fresh green corner, thanks to the beautiful trees, the foliage of which rustled behind the wall of the garden on the right, beneath the caressing light of that bright May afternoon. No, she had not experienced the same emotion on the previous occasion when she asked the porter if M. Vincy was at home. He was again at home. She rang the bell. She heard a door open and light and nimble footsteps advancing. She remembered the heavy tread on her previous visit. It was not the servant who was coming to open the door, nor was it René. She knew the sound of his footsteps too well to be mistaken. She foresaw she was about to meet her lover's sister, the Emilie whose absence had favoured her previous visit. She had no time to reason upon the disadvantages of this unexpected incident. Madam Fresneau—for it was she—had opened the door, and showed a face which took away all Suzanne's doubts, so great was the likeness between brother and sister. Emilie had no doubt about the visitor's identity, and most certainly René's fresh sufferings during the last few days, joined to Claude's revelations in their conversation, had aroused her antipathy against Madam Moraines, for

she could not conceal an expression of passionate hostility as she replied to the young woman's inquiry in most biting tones:

"No, madam, my brother is not at home." Then, her sisterly love suggesting an expedient to anticipate any question as to the possible time of René's return, she added: "He left on a journey this very morning."

That this reply was a lie the porter had demonstrated beforehand. But that it was a sudden invention of Emilie's, Suzanne could not think. She believed that Madam Fresneau was obeying instructions given her by her brother. She made no attempt to find out anything further, and contented herself by uttering, with a bow, a "Madam," in which the perfect grace of the Society lady took the only revenge permissible for the almost impolite sullenness of the middle-class woman. But that did not prevent her feeling, more than disappointment, real sorrow. She did not even ask herself whether or not Emilie's strange reception was explained by René's indiscretions. She said to herself: "He does not wish to see me again;" and this idea pierced her heart. When she reached the street she turned back to take a glance at the window of the room where she had paid her first visit to her lover. On that occasion, too, she had turned and had been able to see him standing behind the half-raised curtain. Would he not take that position again to watch her go when his sister told him who had called? She waited five minutes, standing upon the pavement, and it was like a fresh misfortune when the curtains remained lowered. She

got into her carriage, a victim of all the sufferings of a woman who really loves and who changes her plan every second. After infinite arguments with herself the woman who never wrote decided to send the poet the following note:

“Saturday, Five o’clock.

“ I went to the Rue Cœtlogon, René, and your sister told me that you had gone away. But I know it is not true. You were there, two paces from me, and would not receive me in that room, every piece of furniture of which ought to bring back to your mind an hour when you could not doubt I was sincere. What reason had I to lie to you then? I beg of you to see me, if only for a minute. Come and read in my eyes that which you have sworn never again to doubt, that you are my all, my life, my heaven. Since last evening I have ceased to live. Your horrible words are always ringing in my ears. No, it was not you who uttered them. Where could you have obtained so much bitterness, almost hatred? Ah! How were you able to condemn me without hearing me, upon the faith of a suspicion of which you will be ashamed when I touch you with the finger of misery? Yes, I ought to be angry with you, to hate you, but in my heart I have nothing but love for you, my René, and a desire to uproot from your soul all that the enemies of our happiness have succeeded in planting there. This step, so contrary to all a woman owes herself, I rejoiced to take, because you could not doubt the sentiment which inspired it. Do not reply. I feel

even in writing to you how powerless a letter is to lay bare the heart. I shall expect you on Monday at eleven at our 'refuge.' I have the right to tell you that I wish to see you, for a prisoner always has the right to defend himself. I will only say one word to you: Come, if you truly loved, even for a day, the woman who does not lie to you, who has never and will never lie to you, I swear, my only love."

When Suzanne had finished her letter she re-read it. A last diplomatic instinct made her hesitate over the signature. She was so completely infatuated that she was ashamed of her hesitation, and wrote her name at the end of the note, an exact image of the strange moral position into which she had allowed herself to be dragged. She lied once more in swearing she did not lie, and nothing was truer, more spontaneous and less artificial than the emotion which dictated this final deception after so many others. She rang the bell, and still contrary to all prudence gave to the footman the letter, a single phrase of which could ruin her, to send at once by a commissionaire. From that moment, during the thirty-six hours which separated her from the appointment she had made, she lived in a state of nervous excitement, of which she would not have believed herself capable. This woman, so mistress of herself, who had been engaged in adventures of the sort, as she maintained herself in Society, for years with the machiavellism of a *roué*, felt herself incapable of following or forming any plan for her conduct with regard to her lover. On Saturday evening she

had to dine out. She dressed as in a dream—a most extraordinary thing for her—and without even looking at herself in the glass. She had not a word to say during the dinner to her neighbour, who was the inevitable Crucé. Making the excuse that she was still not feeling well, she ordered her carriage for ten o'clock. She returned home without taking any notice of the remarks her husband made her, while his presence was quite intolerable to her; it was on his account, because he was at home on Sunday, that she had been obliged to postpone the appointment with René till Monday. If only the latter consented to keep the appointment! With what anguish, as she handed her cloak to the servant, did she look at the tray upon which the evening letters were placed. The poet's writing was not on any of the envelopes. All that sad Sunday she spent in bed, prostrate with a so-called headache; in reality she was trying to arrange her ideas in the event of his not believing her when she explained the visit to the Rue du Mont Thabor by the story of the sick friend. But he would believe it. She would not admit the possibility of his not believing her. It was too painful to her. Her fever of desire and anguish, of hope and apprehension, reached its height on Monday morning, while she ascended the staircase of the house in the Rue des Dames. If René was waiting for her, hidden as usual behind the half-open door, her note had sufficed to touch him. She was saved. But no, the door was shut. Her hand trembled as she inserted the key in the lock. She entered the first room, which was

empty, with drawn blinds. She sat down in the semi-darkness in the room, every detail of which spoke of recent happiness—now far away! It was the upper middle-class drawing-room, with arm-chairs and a blue velvet couch. The few books René had brought were standing regularly and well dusted in the bookcase. Suzanne listened to the ticking of the clock in the silent room. Seconds passed, then minutes, then a quarter of an hour, and still René did not come. He would not come. The woman, accustomed from her youth to satisfy every desire, was overcome with an agony of despair at this evidence. She began to cry like a child, and she shed real tears this time, without any thought of enacting a comedy. She wished to write, then when she had found paper in the writing-case which her lover had left upon the table, opened the ink-pot, picked up the pen, she pushed away all these objects, repeating: "What is the use?" and to leave a trace of her visit, if René came after her departure, she placed upon the table the scented handkerchief with which she had dried her bitter tears. She said to herself: "He loved that perfume!" Near the handkerchief she also put her gloves, which he always buttoned for her before she left; and she departed, with death in her heart, after going into the bedroom, where stood the bed with its lace covering. How happy she had been in that flat! Was it possible that those times were gone for ever?

CHAPTER XIX

ALL OR NOTHING

WHEN the commissionaire delivered Suzanne's letter in the Rue Cœtlogon the Fresneau family was at dinner. Françoise came in holding the elegant envelope in her coarse, red fingers, and from René's face alone, when he tore it open, Emilie guessed from whom the note had come. She trembled. She had found, urged on by the sight of her brother's terrible despair, the courage to close the door against the unknown woman, in whom her instinct had divined danger, and the certain cause of this despair, the woman of whom Claude Larcher had spoken on his visit, as of a most perverse creature. But she put off telling the young man what she had done from hour to hour, feeling herself incapable of braving his anger. The look René gave her, after reading the letter, made her lower her eyes with a blush. Fresneau, who was engaged in dissecting a fowl with rare skill, remained motionless, with a wing upon the point of his fork. Then he was afraid he had been noticed by his wife, and he justified the surprise depicted upon his face by saying, with a hearty laugh: "This knife cuts like my grandmother's slipper." His joke was lost in a silence which lasted till the

dinner was over, a silence threatening to Emilie, inexplicable to Fresneau and unnoticed by René, whose throat was contracted and who did not touch a single course. Françoise had hardly removed the cloth and placed the tobacco jar near the liqueur decanter before the poet retired to his room, after asking the servant for a reading-lamp.

"He seems to be angry?" the professor inquired.

"Angry?" Emilie answered. "No doubt some idea for his play has entered his mind and he wants to write it down at once. But it is very bad to work directly after dinner. I will go and tell him so."

Delighted at having thought of this excuse the young woman also entered her brother's room. She found that he had begun to scribble an answer to Suzanne's note in the dusk, without even waiting for a light. He reckoned, without a doubt, upon his sister's appearance, for he said to her sharply, in a voice full of anger:

"So someone came to see me to-day and you shut the door in their face, saying that I was away?"

"René!" Emilie said, clasping her hands, "forgive me. I thought I was doing right. It is true, in the state you were I was afraid of that woman's presence." Finding in the ardour of her love the strength to utter her whole thoughts she went on: "This woman," she repeated, "is your evil genius."

"It seems," the poet went on with concentrated rage, "you still take me for a child of fifteen. Yes or no? Am I at home here?" he went on with an outburst. "If I am not, tell me, and I will go and

live elsewhere. I have had enough, do you understand, of your guardianship. Look after your son and your husband and allow me to live after my own fashion."

He saw his sister standing before him quite pale and crushed by the harshness of the tone he had used to her. He was himself ashamed of the outburst. It was so unjust to make poor Emilie expiate the grief which was eating out his heart. But he was not at one of those moments when one retracts such a wrong, and instead of throwing himself into the arms of the woman he had stricken so cruelly in her most sensitive spot, he left the room, slamming the door after him; he picked up his hat in the ante-room, and from the spot where she remained standing quite unnerved Emilie could hear him leave the flat. The good fellow Fresneau, who, after being surprised by the tone of René's voice, had also heard the noise of his departure, entered the room to find out what had happened. He saw his wife in the dusk pale as death. He took her hands, with the words, "What has happened?" in so affectionate a way that she leant upon his breast, sobbing:

"Ah! my dear, I have only you in the world!"

She wept, her head upon the good fellow's shoulder, while he was uncertain whether to curse or bless his brother-in-law, so grieved was he at his wife's suffering, and at the same time touched by the movement which had precipitated her towards him.

"Come," he said, "be reasonable. Tell me what passed between you."

"He has no heart, he has no heart," was the only answer he could get.

"Yes, yes!" he replied, and he added this profound utterance with the lucidity which real feeling gives to the least perspicacious: "He knows too well how much you love him, that is all, and he abuses the fact."

While Fresneau did his best to console Emilie, without dragging from her the secret of her discussion with the poet, the latter walked the streets, a victim of a fresh attack of the grief which, since the previous evening, had been devouring his soul. Suzanne had been right in thinking that a voice would plead for her in him against what he knew and what he had seen. Who then has loved and been betrayed without hearing the voice which reasons against all reason, which tells us to hope against all hope? Belief for ever is the end of it. René would have paid with his blood for the shadow of the shadow of a doubt, and the more he reconsidered all the details which led him to the evidence, the more that evidence was engraved in his heart. "But suppose she was paying an innocent call?" the voice of love suggested. Innocent? Would she have left her carriage some distance from the house she was visiting? Would she have gone away by the other door veiled, walking with the same step and scanning the street with the same look she used when leaving her rendezvous with him? Then Desforges' appearance almost at once at the other entrance! All the proofs furnished by Claude accumulated: the opinion of Society, the ruin

of the Moraines at one period, the position found for the husband, Suzanne's offer to him to make money and her proved falsehoods. "What stronger proofs can I have," he said to himself, "unless I catch her red-handed?" He thought of his mistress's visit to the Rue Cœtlogon, of the note he had in his pocket: "And she dares to ask me to see her! What can she want to tell me? Yes, I will keep her appointment, and my vengeance shall be to insult her as Claude insults Colette! No," he went on, "that would be degrading myself to her level; real vengeance is to ignore. I will not go." He wavered between these two ideas, and felt himself powerless to make a choice, so profound was his longing to see Suzanne again and so sincere his resolution not to again fall into the snare of her lies. His anxiety became so great that he desired to ask Claude's advice. Then, too, he was surprised that his faithful friend had not sent to ask for news that morning, as he had said he would.

"I will go, though at this hour it will be a journey wasted," René told himself as he reached the Rue de Varenne. It was about half-past ten in the evening when he rang the bell at the great door. He saw a light in one of the windows of the flat the writer occupied. Claude was actually at home contrary to all probability. René found him this time in the first of the three rooms, the smoking-room. A lamp with a red globe lit with a pretty light this narrow room, decorated with a large piece of tapestry, and a photograph representing "The Triumph of Death," attributed to Orcagna. In a corner the blue flame of

a spirit lamp burned beneath a kettle. The tea-tray with two cups, a flagon of Spanish wine and *foie gras* upon a porcelain dish, showed that the host of this quiet flat expected a visitor. Little Russian cigarettes, Colette's favourites, also indicated to René that it was someone. He would not, however, have ventured to believe without his friend's obvious embarrassment, as he ended by telling him with a somewhat shame-faced smile.

"Yes, I prefer you to know: *canis reversus ad vomitum suum*. Yes, I am expecting Colette. She is coming after the theatre. Would it be unpleasant for you to meet her?"

"Frankly," René said, "I would rather not see her."

"Well," Claude asked, "how do you stand?" When the poet had told him in a few words the actual situation, the scene at the Opéra, Suzanne's visit, then her request for an appointment by letter, he went on: "What can I reply to you? With my actual weakness am I qualified to speak to you? What does it matter? I see my own path quite clearly, though I fall at every step like a blind man. Why should I not see as clearly for you, who have perhaps more strength of mind than I have? You are younger and you have not yet fallen. Have you decided to become, like me, an erotic maniac, a madman who goes in life where his sex leads him—that is the worst kind? Then go to the rendezvous. Suzanne will not give you a reason—not one. But after what you have said to her, if she were innocent,

she would have a horror of you and would not wish to see you again! She came to your house. Why? To see you in your room, to let her beauty obtain control of your senses. She calls you, where? To the place where you can least resist her beauty. She will tell you what women say in such a position. Words, words, and more words. But you will see her, hear the rustle of her skirt. You know very well that you will rush upon her to embrace her, and then good-bye to reproaches! Everything will be effaced—for ten minutes. But afterwards? You saw my courage yesterday. Look upon my cowardice of to-day, and say to yourself: 'That is the position I shall be in on Sunday!' After all, if you do not feel yourself capable of breaking with her, if you need the wine, as the drunkard does, if you must fall ill and die, this cowardice is a solution. I have accepted it. Suzanne will be your evil genius as Colette is mine. Only remember what I have told you this evening: it is the end of everything. My talent has departed. As to honour, what position could I take after forgiving what I have forgiven? Ah!" he concluded in heart-rending tones, "you are still in time to save yourself. You are at the top of the ladder which leads to the sewer; listen to the cry of the wretch who is immersed even to his shoulders. Now, good-bye, if you do not want to see Colette. Why did she say what she did? You do not know, and when one does not know it, just as if it were not true. Good-bye again, love me, René, and pity me."

"No," the poet said to himself on his way home,

"I will not descend into this slough." For the first time, perhaps, since he assisted as a sad witness of Claude's grievous amours, he really understood the malady by which his wretched friend was attacked. He had just discovered in himself the sentimental monstrosity which degraded Colette's lover: the union of the most absolute contempt and of the most passionate physical desire for a woman who had been definitely judged and condemned. Yet after all he knew he still loved Suzanne. His noble love had descended as low as that, and so had his cult for the woman he had once called his madonna. If he yielded to his love for the first time, Claude was right, all would be ended. His nausea before the abyss of corruption in which his friend was plunged had been so great that it gave him the strength to tell himself: "I give my word of honour I will not go to the Rue des Dames on Monday," and that he knew how to keep. At the hour Suzanne was awaiting him in the little blue drawing-room, trembling with despair, he too was trembling, shut in his room and repeating to himself, "I will not go, I will not go." He thought of his friend and went on, "Poor Claude!" feeling in his heart all the distress of this victim of luxury vanquished in the struggle in which he in his turn was engaged. He pitied himself as he pitied Colette's victim, and that pity aided his courage, as also did his religious habits, prolonged till late in life. He had ceased to practise them since he had ceased to be pure; and he had allowed himself to be enveloped by that atmosphere of doubt which every modern artist traverses more or less before re-

turning to Christianity as to the only source of spiritual life. But even at the moment of doubt the moral muscles developed by the gymnastics of childhood and of youth continue to display their strength: in this resistance to the most pressing appeal of physical love the nephew and pupil of Father Taconet found this power at his service. When mid-day struck he said to himself: "Suzanne has returned home. I am saved."

He was not, and his inability to follow in its full vigour the advice given him by Claude ought to have given him a proof of it. Neither on that Monday, nor the following days, did he decide clearly and bravely to leave the city where lived the woman from whom he believed and desired himself delivered. He made himself, for remaining in Paris, all sorts of specious excuses. "I am as far away from her in this room as I should be in Venice or in Rome, as I shall not visit her and she will not come here." In reality he expected—he did not know what. But he felt his passion was too ardent to die out in that way. A meeting would take place between Suzanne and him. How? Where? What did it matter, it would take place. He did not admit that cowardly and secret hope. But it was so deep in his heart that he did not leave his room in the Rue Cœtlogon, always ready to receive another letter, to see himself the object of a supreme attempt. The letter did not come. No attempt was made and he was eating his heart out. Sometimes the desire of meeting Suzanne face to face, which he experienced without admitting

it, so exasperated him that he rushed to his desk and wrote to the address of that infamous creature pages of the most frenzied love. His inner rage showed itself in mad lines in which he insulted and idolised her, in which he mingled words of love with words of hate. Then it was that Claude's laments came back to his mind, and he tore up the paper, aware of the sad ~~glean~~ he stifled in his heart. He retired to rest with ideas full of despair, thinking of death as the only happiness he could now desire. He got up in the morning with similar thoughts. The brightness of the day, so radiant in Nature's renewal, was intolerable to him, and the poetry which survived in him, in spite of everything, aspired towards that hour of dusk when the waning light accords so well with a heart's distress. For in the gathering darkness he could taste the pleasure of tears. It was the hour, too, when his poor sister feared most for him. They were reconciled the day after their dispute.

"Are you still angry with me?" she asked him with that grace proper to real love.

"No," he replied, "mine was the fault; but I implore you, if you do not wish to see me again unjust and wicked, as I was the other day, never again make mention of what you spoke to me then."

"Never again," she said, and she kept her promise. Still she saw her brother waste away, his cheeks got ~~a~~ ~~yellow~~ ~~er~~, and a fire seemed to burn in his eyes, which frightened her; for that reason, at the dangerous hour when daylight was departing, she came and sat near him. Fresneau had taken Constant for a walk

to the Luxembourg. She had made an excuse to remain at home. She took the hand of her beloved brother, and that mute caress softened the poor fellow. He replied to her embrace without speaking a word. That relaxation into a more gentle emotion lasted till the thought of Desforbes came suddenly into his mind. He said to Emilie: "Leave me." She obeyed him in the hope of appeasing him. She went away; he threw himself upon the bed and jealousy twisted his heart in its burning tentacles. Ah! What agony!

How many days passed like that? Barely seven, but they appeared to him, like his suffering, infinite. On looking at the almanack about the end of the week he saw that the end of May was approaching. The business habits of the middle classes, which had always presided over his life, decided him, although the step horrified him, to surrender the flat in the Rue des Dames. He wished to give notice and pay the bill. He chose the afternoon for his visit, so as to be sure of not meeting Suzanne. "As if she had not already forgotten me," he said to himself. What was his surprise on finding upon the drawing-room table, not only the handkerchief and the gloves, but a note folded and directed to M. d'Albert, which she had left there in the course of a second visit. He opened it with hands which trembled so that it took him five minutes to read the few phrases, of which several words had been half effaced by tears.

"I have returned here, my beloved! In our refuge, in the name of the memories which must be there, for

you as well as for me, I implore you once more to see me again. Will you not think of me in this, our dear refuge, without those horrible gleams of hate I have seen in your eyes? Remember the love I have shown you when you read these lines. No, I cannot live if you doubt the only truth of my life. I repeat to you I am neither angry nor hurt; I am in despair; and if you do not feel it, it is because I can no longer make you, because at this moment there is in my soul only my love and my sorrow. Good-bye, my beloved! How many times have I uttered those words at this door? But then I added '*au revoir*.' Now it must be really good-bye upon my lips and in my heart. But is it possible it can be for ever like this? "

" Good-bye, my beloved! " the young man repeated to himself.

THE END

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 WHEN IT WAS DARK. GUY THORNE.
 THE OVEN. GUY THORNE.
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